



Mikhail Sholokhov
**VIRGIN SOIL
UPTURNED**

BOOK TWO
FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow

First published in 1922

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
CHAPTER ONE	7
CHAPTER TWO	16
CHAPTER THREE	26
CHAPTER FOUR	41
CHAPTER FIVE	59
CHAPTER SIX	79
CHAPTER SEVEN	88
CHAPTER EIGHT	102
CHAPTER NINE	131
CHAPTER TEN	151
CHAPTER ELEVEN	177
CHAPTER TWELVE	188
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	195
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	221
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	233
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	242
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	257
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	273
CHAPTER NINETEEN	291
CHAPTER TWENTY	307
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	319
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	333
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	361
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	380
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	398
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	414
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	433
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	438
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	451

CHAPTER ONE

The earth swelled with rain and, when the wind parted the clouds, it basked in the bright sun and gave off a bluish vapour. Mists rose in the mornings from the river and the stagnant, marshy lowlands. They rolled in curling waves across Gremyachy Log towards the low steppe-land hills and there they melted, dissolved imperceptibly into a tender turquoise haze; and everywhere, on the leaves of the trees, on the rush-thatched roofs of cottages and barns the heavy, abundant dew lay until noon like scattered pellets of shot, bowing the grass under its weight.

The couch grass in the steppe was knee-high. Beyond the common the sweet clover was in bloom. In the evening its honey scent pervaded the whole village, filling the girls' hearts with yearning. The winter corn stretched in a solid dark-green wall to the horizon, and the spring-sown fields gladdened the eye with unusually abundant growth. The sandy ground bristled with young shoots of maize.

By the middle of June the weather set fair. Not a single cloud appeared in the sky and the flowering rain-washed steppe looked wonderful in the sun. It was like a young mother with a child at her breast, extremely beautiful, calm, a little weary, and all aglow with the pure and happy smile of motherhood.

Every morning, before daybreak, Yakov Lukich Ostrovnov would throw a shabby tarpaulin raincoat over his shoulders and go out to the fields to look at the corn. He would stand for a long time over the furrow from which the green dew-besparkled sweep of winter wheat began. He would stand motionless, his head drooping, like an old, tired stallion, and think to himself: If a kalmyk¹ don't blow while the wheat is ripening, if that wheat don't get a blast of dry wind, the collective farm will be full of grain, God damn it. It has all the luck, this cursed Soviet government. In the old days we hardly ever had rain at the right time, and this year there's been buckets of it! And if there's a good harvest and the collective farmers get a good return for their work, will you ever be able to turn them against the Soviets? Not on your life! A hungry man's a wolf in the forest—he'll go anywhere you like; but a well-fed man's like a pig at his trough—you can't move him. What's Captain Polovtsev thinking about, I wonder? What is he waiting for? I can't make it out. It's just the time now to give the Soviets a jolt, but he's taking it easy....

It was spite, of course, that gave Ostrovnov such thoughts; he was tired of waiting for the coup that Polovtsev had promised. He knew very well that Polovtsev was by no means taking it easy and had good reason for waiting. Nearly every night, messengers from distant villages and stanitsas came down the steep bluff behind his orchard. They came down on foot, leaving their horses among the trees at its leafy top. In answer to their quiet prearranged knock he would open the door without lighting the lamp and lead them in to see Polovtsev in the back room of the cottage. The shutters of both windows overlooking the yard were kept shut day and night and masked on the inside with thick grey

¹ Kalmyk—here, south-east wind.—*Trans.*

woollen blankets. Even on a sunny day the room was as dark as a cellar, and smelled like a cellar, of mildew, damp, and stale, exhausted air. In the day-time neither Polovtsev nor Latyevsky left the house; a pail under a loosened floor-board served these voluntary prisoners' natural needs.

Ostrovnov would light matches in the passage and hurriedly examine every one of the furtive nocturnal visitors, but not once had he encountered a familiar face; they were all strangers and, by the look of them, had all travelled far. On one occasion he dared to ask quietly: "Where are you from, Cossack?"

The flickering light of the match fell on the bearded, good-natured face of an elderly Cossack, and Ostrovnov saw his eyes narrow and teeth gleam in a derisive grin.

"From the other world, Cossack," the visitor replied in the same quiet whisper and added sharply: "Take me to the chief quick and don't ask questions."

And two days later the same bearded man and another Cossack, a little younger, came again. They carried something heavy into the passage, but their footsteps were quiet, almost soundless. Ostrovnov struck a match and saw that the bearded one was holding two officers' saddles, and had two silver-embossed bridles hanging over his shoulder; the other was carrying a long shapeless bundle wrapped in a shaggy black cloak.

The bearded Cossack winked at Ostrovnov as if he were an old acquaintance and asked: "Are they in? Both of them?" And without waiting for a reply, walked towards the room.

The match burned out, singeing Ostrovnov's fingers. The bearded Cossack tripped over something in the darkness and swore under his breath.

"Just a minute," Ostrovnov said, fumbling for a match with fingers that refused to obey him.

Polovtsev himself opened the door and said quietly:

"Come inside. Come inside, I say. What are you messing about with out there? You come in as well, Yakov Lukich. I shall need you. Keep quiet, I'll light the lamp."

He lighted a storm lantern but covered the top of it with a jacket and only a narrow strip of light fell slantwise on the ochre-painted floor.

The visitors uttered respectful greetings and set down their burdens by the door. The bearded one took two paces forward and, clicking his heels, held out a packet that he had taken from his breast pocket. Polovtsev opened the envelope, scanned the letter rapidly, holding it up to the light, and said: "Give Sedoy my thanks. There will be no answer. I shall expect news from him not later than the twelfth. You may go now. You won't be caught by the dawn, will you?"

"On no account. We've got fast horses," the bearded man answered.

"Be off, then. Thank you for your services."

"We are glad to serve."

They both turned as one man, clicked their heels and left. There's training for you! Ostrovnov thought with admiration. Army men of the old school, you can see that by their bearing. But why don't they ever mention his rank?

Polovtsev came up to him and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. Ostrovnov involuntarily stiffened, straightening his back and pressing his arms to his sides.

"Good men, eh?" Polovtsev laughed softly. "They won't let us down. They'd follow me through hell itself, not like some of the scoundrels and faint-hearts of Voiskovoy Village. Now let's see what they've brought us. . . ."

Dropping on one knee, Polovtsev deftly untied the white raw-hide straps twisted tightly round the cloak, unfolded it and took out the parts of a dismantled light machine-gun and four dully gleaming disks of ammuni-

tion wrapped in oily sackcloth. Then he carefully drew out two sabres. One of them was a plain Cossack weapon in a battered well-worn sheath, the other was an officer's sabre, with a hilt richly ornamented in silver and a tarnished St. George sword-knot; the nielloed sheath hung from a black Caucasian belt.

Sinking on both knees, Polovtsev held out the sword on his upturned palms, his head thrown back as if to admire the dull gleam of the silver; then he clasped it to his breast and in a trembling voice said: "My beloved, my beauty! My true old friend! You shall still render me devoted service!"

His massive lower jaw quivered slightly and tears of frenzied delight welled up in his eyes, but he managed to control himself and, turning a pale, distorted face towards Ostrovnov, asked loudly: "Do you recognise it, Lukich?"

Ostrovnov swallowed convulsively and nodded. He recognised the sword. He had first seen it in 1915, worn by the young and dashing Cornet Polovtsev on the Austrian front.

Latyevsky, who had been lying on his bed in silent indifference, sat up, letting his bare feet dangle, stretched himself until his bones cracked, and glanced at the scene with a sombre glint in his solitary eye.

"A touching reunion!" he said hoarsely. "The rebel's romance, I suppose. Ugh, how I hate these sentimental scenes puffed up with false emotion!"

"Be quiet!" Polovtsev said sharply.

Latyevsky shrugged.

"Why should I be quiet? And what must I be quiet about?"

"Please be quiet!" Polovtsev said very softly, rising to his feet and moving towards the bed with slow, almost stealthy strides.

In his twitching left hand he held the sword, with his right he clawed at the collar of his grey shirt. Ostrovnov watched in horror as Polovtsev's frenzied eyes met at the bridge of his nose and his puffy face became the colour of his shirt.

Latyevsky lay back calmly on the bed and cupped his head in his hands.

"Pure theatre!" he said, smiling contemptuously, his solitary eye fixed on the ceiling. "I have seen all this before, more than once, on second-rate provincial stages. I'm tired of it!"

Polovtsev halted within two paces of him, raised his hand with a gesture of utter weariness and wiped the perspiration from his forehead; then his hand fell limply to his side.

"Nerves..." he croaked feebly, like a man suffering from paralysis, and his face shifted sideways in a long convulsive shudder faintly resembling a smile.

"And I've heard that before, too. Stop being an old wonian, Polovtsev! Pull yourself together."

"Nerves," Polovtsev moaned. "My nerves are playing me up. . . . I'm as tired as you are of this darkness, this grave. . . ."

"Darkness is the wise man's friend. It promotes philosophical meditation about life. As a matter of fact, the only people who actually suffer from nerves are anaemic, pimply maidens and women suffering from verbal diarrhoea and migraine. For an officer, nerves are a shame and a disgrace! But you're only pretending, Polovtsev, you haven't any nerves, it's just a whim! I don't believe you! Upon my word as an officer, I don't!"

"You're not an officer, you're a swine!"

"And I've heard that from you many a time before, but I still shan't challenge you to a duel, damn you! It's out of date and out of place and there are more important things to be done. Moreover, as you know, my

honoured friend, duels are fought with rapiers, not with policemen's flappers, like the one you so touchingly and tenderly clasped to your bosom just now. As an old artilleryman, I despise such pieces of useless decoration. And there is one more argument against challenging you to a duel: you are a plebeian by birth, but I am a Polish nobleman of one of the oldest families that. . . ."

"Look here, you Polish sw. . . squireen!" Polovtsev interrupted him rudely, and his voice had suddenly regained its usual firmness and metallic commanding ring. "You dare to mock the weapon of St. George?! If you say another word, I will cut you down like a dog!"

Latyevsky sat up on the bed. His lips had lost all trace of their former ironical smile. With unaffected seriousness he said: "Now that is something I believe! Your voice betrays the complete sincerity of your intentions. I shall therefore shut up."

He lay down again and drew the old flannel blanket up to his chin.

"I'll kill you all the same," Polovtsev maintained stubbornly, standing over the bed, his head lowered like a bull's. "With this very sword I'll make one aristocratic Polish swine into two. And do you know when I'll do it? As soon as we overthrow the Soviets on the Don!"

"Well, in that case I shall live to a ripe old age. Perhaps I shall live for ever," Latyevsky said laughing and with an oath turned his face to the wall.

Ostrovnov near the door shifted from one foot to the other, as if he were standing on hot embers. Several times he attempted to slip out of the room, but Polovtsev restrained him with a gesture. Eventually he could bear it no longer and begged imploringly: "Allow me to go, Your Honour! It'll soon be getting light and I must be out in the fields early."

Polovtsev sat down on a chair, placed the sword across his knees and, leaning over it, fell into a long silence.

There was no other sound save the heavy wheezing of his breath and the ticking of his big watch on the table. Ostrovnov began to think he was dozing, but suddenly Polovtsev jerked his heavy thickset body off the chair and said: "Take the saddles, Lukich, and I'll take the rest. We'll go and hide all this in a safe dry place. Perhaps in that—what's it called, damn it—in the shed where you keep your fuel, eh?"

"Yes, that's a good place," Ostrovnov agreed gladly, for he was longing to get out of the room.

But no sooner had he laid hands on one of the saddles than Latyevsky jumped up from the bed as if he had been scalded.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, his solitary eye glittering furiously. "What do you think you're doing, may I ask?"

Polovtsev, who had been bending over the cloak, straightened up and asked coldly: "Well, what's the matter? What has upset you?"

"Don't you understand? Hide the saddles and that scrap-iron there if you like, but leave the machine-gun and the disks! You're not staying at a friend's country-house, we may need the machine-gun at any moment. You understand that, I hope."

After brief reflection Polovtsev agreed. "Perhaps you are right, you Radziwill bastard. Let everything stay here then. You can go off to bed, Yakov Lukich, you are free now."

And how lasting the old army training turned out to be! Before Ostrovnov had time to think, his bare feet had of their own accord, quite involuntarily, done a "left about turn" and his calloused heels had come together with a dry, almost inaudible click. Polovtsev noticed it and smiled faintly, but as soon as he closed the door behind him Ostrovnov realised his mistake. That beard-

ed devil got me mixed up with that smartness of his, he thought, grunting.

He did not close his eyes once until dawn. Hopes for the success of the uprising alternated with thoughts of failure and belated repentance of the fact that he had really been very reckless in throwing in his lot with two such forlorn hopes as Polovtsev and Latyevsky. I was too hasty. I've put my own neck under the chopper, Ostrovnov groaned to himself. I ought to have waited, old fool that I am, kept in the background for a bit, not sworn myself like this to Alexander Anisimovich Polovtsev. If they'd got the better of the Communists, I could have joined up with them and reaped the benefit, but now I may be finding myself in the cart before I know it. But look at it this way—with me hanging back and others doing the same, what'll happen? Are we to let this cursed Soviet government ride on our backs for the rest of our lives? That won't do either! And we shan't get rid of it without a fight, that we shan't! If only something definite would happen. . . . Alexander Anisimovich promises a landing of foreign forces and help from the Kuban. It all sounds nice enough but what'll come of it? God alone knows! Suppose the Allies give up the idea of landing on our soil? Then what? They'll send us their English greatcoats as they did in 1919 and stay at home themselves, drinking their coffee and having a good time with their women—much use those greatcoats would be to us then! We'll be wiping the bloody snot off our noses with 'em, and that's all. The Bolsheviks will smash us, sure as God they will! They're good at it. Then it'll be all up with us who rise against them. Everything will go up in smoke in the Don steppes!

These thoughts made Ostrovnov so sorry for himself that he could have cried. For a long time he sighed and groaned and crossed himself and muttered prayers, then his harassed mind again returned to worldly matters.

Why can't Alexander Anisimovich and that one-eyed Pole get on together? What are they always at each other's throats about? A great task ahead of them and they live like a couple of savage dogs in one kennel! And it's mostly that one-eyed fellow who starts the row. One of the shifty sort he is. Now he says one thing, now another. He's a bad lot, I wouldn't trust him an inch. No wonder they say: "Don't trust the one-eyed, the hunchbacked, and your own wife." Alexander Anisimovich will kill him, that he will! Well, good riddance of him, he's not of our faith anyhow.

And lulled by these reassuring thoughts Ostrovnov at last fell into a brief and troubled sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

When Ostrovnov awoke, the sun had already risen. In little more than an hour he had managed to have a great number of dreams, each one more absurd and disgusting than the last. He had dreamed that he was standing in church by the lectern, young and smart, in full bridegroom's dress, and beside him, in a long wedding gown, shrouded in a cloudy white veil, stood Latyevsky hopping wildly from one foot to the other and boring into him with a lasciviously mocking eye that kept winking a shameless challenge. "Waclaw Augustovich," Ostrovnov could hear himself saying, "it's no good us marrying each other. You aren't up to much, but you're still a man, you know. So what's the use? And besides I'm married already. Let's tell the priest all about it, or he'll pair us up and we'll be the laughing-stock of the whole village!" But Latyevsky took Ostrovnov's hand in his own cold palm and, bending towards him, whispered confidentially: "Don't tell anyone you're married! And I'll make a wife for you that will set you gasping!" To

hell with you, you one-eyed devil! Ostrovnov wanted to shout and tried to tear his hand away, but Latyevsky's fingers were hard as steel, and his own voice had become strangely soundless and his lips seemed to be made of cotton wool. Ostrovnov spat furiously and woke up; his beard and pillow were sticky with spittle.

No sooner had he made the sign of the cross and whispered "God bless us", than he fell asleep again and had another dream, that he and his son Semyon, with Agafon Dubtsov and other villagers, were wandering about a huge plantation and picking tomatoes, under the supervision of young women overseers dressed in white. For some reason he himself and all the Cossacks with him were naked, but no one except himself seemed to feel any shame at his nakedness. Dubtsov, standing with his back to him, was bending over a tomato plant, and Ostrovnov, choking with laughter and indignation, was saying to him: "At least you might stop bending down like that, you piebald gelding! Think of the women!"

Ostrovnov picked tomatoes, squatting embarrassedly on his haunches and using only his right hand. his left he held as does a naked bather before entering the water.

When he awoke, he sat for a long time on the bed, staring dully in front of him with wildly frightened eyes. Vile dreams like this don't come for nothing. There's trouble ahead! he thought to himself, feeling an unpleasant heaviness on his heart and, wide awake now, spat again at the memory of what he had dreamed.

In the blackest of moods he got dressed, kicked the cat that came purring round his legs, and at breakfast for no apparent reason called his wife an idiot. He even brandished his spoon at his daughter-in-law as if she were a little girl instead of a grown woman, when she made a tactless remark about household matters at table. Amused at his father's lack of restraint, Semyon

pulled a foolishly frightened face and winked at his wife, who began to shake all over with silent laughter. That was the last straw. Ostrovnov threw the spoon down on the table and shouted in a voice choking with anger: "You'll grin on the other side of your face one of these days!"

Without finishing his breakfast, he rose demonstratively from the table, but, as luck would have it, put his hand on the edge of the soup bowl and tipped the remains of the hot soup over his trousers. His daughter-in-law covered her face with her hands and darted into the passage. Semyon remained seated at the table, dropping his head on his hands; his muscular back and shoulders were shaking violently with laughter. Even Ostrovnov's ever-serious wife could not restrain her mirth.

"What's taken you, father, today?" she asked laughing. "Did you get out of bed on the wrong side or was it a bad dream?"

"What do you know about it, you old witch?!" Ostrovnov shouted furiously and rushed away from the table.

As he stormed out of the kitchen he caught his new sateen shirt on a nail sticking out of the door-post and slit the sleeve from cuff to elbow. Then he went to his room and began to search in the chest for another shirt, whereupon the lid of the chest, which he had propped carelessly against the wall, descended with a juicy thud on the back of his head.

"Oh, hell! What a day!" Ostrovnov exclaimed in vexation, collapsing weakly on a stool and fingering the large lump that had arisen on his skull.

Somehow he managed to change his soup-stained trousers and torn shirt, but was in such a hurry that he forgot to fasten his fly-buttons. In this unseemly state Ostrovnov walked nearly as far as the collective-farm

management office, wondering why the women he encountered greeted him with rather strange smiles and hastily turned away. His perplexity was unceremoniously dispelled by Grandad Shchukar.

"Gettin' old, Yakov Lukich, me boy?" Shchukar asked sympathetically, halting in front of him.

"Well, and are you getting younger? Not by the look of you. Your eyes are as red as a rabbit's and all watery."

"My eyes are waterin' from readin' at night. I've started readin' in my old age and gettin' all sorts of higher education, but I keeps meself tidy. You're gettin' forgetful though, just like an old man..."

"What makes you think that?"

"You've forgotten to shut the gate, you're lettin' the cattle out..."

"Sen'yon will shut it," Ostrovnov answered absent-mindedly.

"Sen'yon won't shut your gate for you..."

Struck by an unpleasant conjecture, Ostrovnov looked down, gasped, and set to work deftly with his fingers. To complete the sum of his misfortunes on that ill-fated morning, as he was entering the management-office yard, he stepped on a large potato that had been left lying about, and measured his length on the ground.

That was too much. Surely there was more in all this than met the eye! The superstitious Ostrovnov felt convinced that some great misfortune lay in wait for him. Pale and with trembling lips, he entered Davidov's room and said: "I'm feeling out of sorts, Comrade Davidov, do you mind if I don't work today? The storekeeper will take my place."

"Yes, you don't look too good, Lukich," Davidov replied considerately. "Go and have a lie-down. Will you see the doctor yourself or shall I send him round?"

Ostrovnov made a despondent gesture. "A doctor won't help me, I'll sleep it off myself."

At home he ordered the shutters to be closed, then undressed and lay down on his bed, patiently awaiting the disaster that hung over him. And it's all because of this perishing government, he grumbled to himself. There's no peace from it day or night! At night I get foolish dreams I never knew the like of in the old days, and in the daytime it's just one long string of troubles. . . . I'll never live the span God allotted me under a government like this! I'll peg out before my time, I know I shall!

That day, however, nothing happened to justify his apprehensions. Disaster was delayed and came upon him only two days later, and from a most unexpected quarter.

Before going to bed, Ostrovnov fortified his courage with a glass of vodka, passed the night in comfort, without any dreams, and in the morning recovered his good spirits. It's passed over, he thought joyfully. He spent the day in his usual busy fashion, but on the next day, Sunday, noticing that his wife seemed worried about something, asked. "You don't seem to be quite yourself today, mother, what is it? Is there something wrong with the cow? I noticed she didn't seem very happy yesterday when she came back from the herd." His wife turned to their son: "Semyon, go out for a bit, will you, I want to talk to father."

Semyon, who was combing his hair in front of the mirror, exclaimed discontentedly: "What are you keeping all these secrets for? Those friends of father's—the devil brought them here—whispering in the back room day and night and now you. . . . Soon this house won't be fit to live in with all these secrets of yours. It's not a home, it's a nunnery. Nothing but whispering and muttering all round you. . . ."

"Well, it's nothing to do with that pigeon brain of yours!" Ostrovnov flared up. "You heard what you were told—go outside! You've been getting a lot too talkative lately. . . . Hold that tongue of yours. Or it will land you in trouble one of these days."

Semyon flushed violently and turned on his father.

"Not so many of your threats either, father," he said huskily. "There're no babies or cowards in this family. And if we start threatening each other, we may all get into trouble."

He went out slamming the door.

"Well, I hope you're proud of him! Turned out a fine hero, the young bastard!" Ostrovnov exclaimed with chagrin.

His wife, whom he had never known to contradict him, said restrainedly: "It depends how you look at it, Lukich. These sponging guests of yours aren't much of a joy to us either. The shifty way we have to live with them here, it's enough to make you sick! Any moment you'll have the authorities searching us, then it'll be all up. Life's just one long worry; we're afraid of every rustle, every knock. I wouldn't wish anyone a life like ours! Why, I'm eating my heart out for both you and Semyon. If they get to know about our lodgers, they'll arrest them and the two of you as well. And then what shall we, women, do on our own? Go out begging?"

"That's enough!" Ostrovnov interrupted her. "I know what I'm doing without you and Semyon telling me. What was it you wanted to say to me? Out with it!"

He closed both doors firmly and sat down close to his wife. At first he listened to her without showing the alarm that had seized him, but in the end, losing all control of himself, he jumped up from the bench and ran about the kitchen, whispering distractedly: "We're lost. Ruined by my own mother! She's killed me!"

Recovering a little, he drank two large mugs of water one after the other and sank down on the bench in gloomy reflection.

"What shall you do now, father?"

Ostrovnov did not answer his wife's question. He had not heard it.

From his wife's account he had learned that not long ago four old women had come to the house and insistently demanded to see the "officer gentlemen". The old women were anxious to know when the officers, with the aid of their host Yakov Lukich and the other Gremyachy Cossacks, would start an uprising and overthrow the godless power of the Soviets. In vain had Ostrovnov's wife assured them that there were no officers in the house and never had been. Loshchilina, a malicious hunchbacked old crone, had replied: "You're too young to fool me, woman! Your own mother-in-law told us the officers had been living in your house ever since winter. We know they're there, keeping out of sight, but we won't tell anyone about them. Take us to see the head one, the one they call Alexander Anisimovich."

When he went in to see Polovtsev, Ostrovnov experienced a familiar feeling of alarm. He thought that when Polovtsev heard what had happened he would fly into a rage and bring his fists into play. He awaited punishment, cringing like a dog. But when, faltering and getting muddled, but concealing nothing, he related what he had heard from his wife, Polovtsev merely laughed contemptuously.

"Well, you're a fine lot of conspirators, I must say. . . . I suppose it was only to be expected though. So your mother's let us down, has she, Lukich? What do you think we ought to do now?"

"You must go away from here, Alexander Anisimovich!" Ostrovnov said firmly, encouraged by this unexpectedly favourable response.

"When?"

"The sooner the better. There's precious little time to spend thinking about it."

"You needn't tell me that. But where?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure. And where's Comrade... I beg your pardon, it was a slip of the tongue. Where is Wacław Augustovich?"

"He's not here. He'll be back tonight and you'll meet him near the orchard. Atamanchukov lives on the edge of the village, too, doesn't he? That's where I'll stay, just for a few more days. . . . Take me there!"

They made their way furtively through the village, and Polovtsev said to Ostrovnov in parting: "Well, good luck to you, Lukich! Just think a little about your mother, Lukich, won't you. She might upset all our plans. Think about that. Meet Latyevsky and tell him where I am now."

He embraced Ostrovnov, brushed his rough unshaven cheek with dry lips and, stepping back, seemed to grow into the peeling plaster wall, and vanished.

Ostrovnov returned home and, when he had got into bed, pushing his wife unusually roughly towards the wall, said: "Listen to me. Don't feed mother any more. And don't give her anything to drink. She'll die soon anyway."

Ostrovnov's wife, who had lived a long and difficult life with him, could only gasp: "But Yakov! You're her son!"

And at that, for almost the first time in their harmonious married life, he struck his ageing wife with all his strength and whispered hoarsely: "Shut up! She'll be the ruin of us! Shut up! Do you want to be exiled?"

Ostrovnov rose heavily, took a small padlock off the chest by the wall, walked cautiously into the warm passage and locked the door of the room where his mother was sleeping.

The old woman heard his footsteps. She had long been accustomed to telling his presence by that sound. And how could she have failed to learn the sound of her son's footsteps, even from afar? Fifty years ago or more, then a young and handsome Cossack woman, she would pause in her housework or cooking and listen with a smile of pride and delight to the uncertain, faltering patter of bare feet on the floor of the next room, the little feet of her first-born, her one and only darling Yakov, a little toddler who had only just learned to walk. Then she heard the clatter of little Yakov's boots as he skipped up the steps coming home from school. In those days he had been quick and frolicsome as a young goat. She could not remember him ever walking at that age—he only ran. And he didn't just run, he skipped along, yes, just like a young goat. Life rolled on, a life like everyone else's—rich in long sorrows, poor in brief joys—and soon she was an elderly mother, listening discontentedly at night to the soft, stealthy footsteps of Yakov, a lithe, sprightly lad of whom in secret she was very proud. When he returned late from courting, his boots seemed scarcely to touch the floor-boards, his youthful tread was so light and swift. Before she noticed it, her son became a grown-up family man. His tread acquired a ponderous confidence. For a long time now the house had echoed with the footsteps of its master, a mature man, almost an old man, but for her he was still "little Yakov", and she often saw him in her dreams, a lively little tow-headed boy. . . .

And now, too, on hearing his footsteps, she asked in her reedy, old woman's voice: "Is that you, Yakov?"

Her son made no reply. He stood a moment by the door, then went out into the yard, for some reason quickening his pace. I've reared a good Cossack and a thrifty master, thank God! the old woman thought as

she fell asleep. Everyone's abed, but he be up and about, looking after the farm. And a proud maternal smile touched her pale wrinkled lips.

After that night the house became a foul place.

The old woman, weak and helpless though she was, still lived; she begged for a crust of bread, a drop of water, and Ostrovnov, creeping along the passage, would hear her stifled, almost inaudible whisper:

"Yakov dear! My own son! What have I done?! At least give me some water!"

The roomy house was almost abandoned by the family. Semyon and his wife spent their days and nights in the yard, and Ostrovnov's wife, if she was compelled to go indoors for some domestic purpose, would come out shaking with sobs. But when at the end of the second day they sat down to supper in the summer kitchen and Ostrovnov after a long silence said, "Let's live out here for the time being," Semyon gave a violent shudder, rose from the table, staggered as if someone had given him a violent push, and walked away.

On the fourth day the house grew quiet. With trembling fingers Ostrovnov unfastened the lock and, accompanied by his wife, went into the room where his mother had once lived. The old woman was lying on the floor near the door, a worn leather mitten that had lain forgotten on the couch since winter had been chewed by her toothless gums. Apparently she had managed to find some water on the window-sill, where a trickle of rain—barely enough to be seen or heard—had fallen through a chink in the shutters, and where, since it was summer, there might have been a sprinkling of dew.

The dead woman's friends washed her dry, withered body, dressed her for burial and wept; but at the funeral there was no one who wept so bitterly and inconsolably as Ostrovnov. That day pain, remorse, and grief at his loss, all weighed with terrible heaviness upon his soul.

CHAPTER THREE

Davidov was oppressed with a yearning for physical labour. Every fibre of his strong healthy body cried out for work, the kind of work that by evening would set all his muscles aching in sweet exhaustion and at night, when the longed-for time of rest came round, would bring light and dreamless slumber.

One day Davidov looked into the forge to find out how the repair of the collectivised mowing-machines was going. The bitter, acidulous smell of incandescent iron and burnt coal, the resonant clang of the anvil and the hoarse moaning of the ancient bellows made him quiver with excitement. For a few minutes, he stood with eyes blissfully closed in the semi-darkness of the forge, delighting in smells that he had known since childhood, smells so familiar they made his heart ache with longing. Then, unable to resist the temptation, he picked up a hammer. . . . For two days he worked from sunrise to sunset without leaving the forge. His landlady brought him his dinner. But how could he work properly, when every half hour someone interrupted him and the iron darkened and grew cold in the tongs, and old Shaly, the smith, grumbled, and the young furnace-boy grinned openly, as he watched Davidov's tired hand dropping the pencil on the earthen floor or scrawling an absurd tangle of wavy lines instead of legible letters on the document he was asked to sign.

Davidov threw up the work in disgust and, in order not to hinder Shaly, left the forge, cursing to himself like a veteran bo'sun; gloomy and out of temper, he ensconced himself in the management office.

His work there amounted to spending whole days deciding commonplace but essential matters connected with the farm—checking the accounts made up by the book-keeper, listening to reports from the team-leaders,

examining various applications from the members of the farm, presiding at production conferences, in short, all the things without which the existence of a large collective economy was quite unthinkable, and which, as work, Davidov found least of all congenial.

He began to sleep badly at night, invariably waking in the morning with a headache. He ate at odd hours and without appetite, and all day he was troubled by a strange feeling of lethargy that he had never known before. Somehow, without noticing it himself, Davidov had grown a bit slack. An unaccustomed irritability appeared in his character, and even outwardly he looked by no means so brisk and sturdy as he had when he first came to Gremyachy Log. And on top of it all, there was this Lushka Nagulnova and his constant thoughts about her, all kinds of thoughts.... Yes, it had been a bad day for him when that cursed woman crossed his path!

Glancing quizzically into Davidov's gaunt face, Razmyotnov said one day: "Still losing weight, Semyon? You look like an old bull after a bad winter; you'll soon be dropping in your tracks. And you're sort of peeling and scurvy.... Are you moulting, or what? You'd better stop casting eyes at our girls, specially wives who've just been divorced. That kind of thing's awful bad for the health...."

"Go to hell with your stupid advice."

"Don't get cross, old chap. I'm only speaking for your own good."

"You're always getting daft ideas into your head, and that's a fact."

Davidov blushed slow but deep. Unable to hide his embarrassment, he made a clumsy attempt to change the subject. Razmyotnov, however, was not to be diverted.

"They must have taught you to blush like that in the Navy, or was it at your factory? Face and neck as well, eh? Or maybe you blush all over? Take off your shirt and I'll have a look."

Only when he noticed a hostile glint appear in Davidov's sombre eyes did Razmyotnov abruptly change his line of conversation. He yawned languidly and started talking about the mowing, but though he regarded Davidov from under half-lowered lids with feigned drowsiness, he either could not, or simply would not, hide the mischievous grin that showed beneath his fair moustache.

Did he merely suspect Davidov's relationship with Lushka, or did he know about it? It looked as if he knew. Of course, he knew! And how could it be kept secret if that brazen-faced Lushka didn't want to keep it secret, and even went out of her way to make it known to the world at large! Evidently it flattered Lushka's cheap vanity to think that she, the cast-off wife of the Party secretary, had taken refuge not with an ordinary collective farmer, but with the chairman himself, and had not been turned away.

Several times she had come out of the management office with Davidov, taking his arm in defiance of strict village custom and even lightly pressing her shoulder against his. He would look round huntedly, afraid of meeting Makar, but did not withdraw his arm. Unwillingly he would fall into step with Lushka, walking with cramped strides like a hobbled horse, and for some reason tripping over nothing. The cheeky village youngsters—ruthless scourge of lovers—would run after them, pulling all kinds of faces and shouting in shrill voices:

*There was a lover and his lass,
One was sour dough, the other was kvass*

They elaborated wildly, producing endless variations of their stupid rhyme, and by the time Lushka and the perspiring Davidov, inwardly cursing the urchins, Lushka and his own weakness, had passed two turnings the "sour dough" had become stiff, flat, rich, sweet, and so on. In the end Davidov's patience would fail him. He would gently loosen the brown fingers that gripped his elbow, and say to Lushka, "Sorry, I must go, I'm in a hurry," and walk on ahead with long strides. But it was not so easy to escape the persistent youngsters' teasing. They would split up into two parties, one of which would stay behind to infuriate Lushka, while the other stubbornly accompanied Davidov. There was only one sure means of escaping their attentions. Davidov would go over to the nearest wattle fence and pretend to break off a switch, and the children would be gone like the wind. Only then would the chairman of the collective farm be left in full control of the street and the surrounding neighbourhood.

Not so long ago, in the small hours of the night, Lushka and Davidov had run into the watchman at a windmill far out in the steppe. The watchman—an old collective farmer named Vershinin—was lying wrapped up in his coat behind the mound of an old marmot burrow. Seeing the couple coming straight towards him, he rose suddenly to his full height and challenged them in strict military fashion. "Halt! Who goes there?" and covered them with a shotgun that besides being very old was not even loaded.

"It's me, Vershinin," Davidov responded unwillingly.

He turned back sharply, pulling Lushka with him, but Vershinin ran after them.

"Comrade Davidov," he begged imploringly, "you haven't got a pinch of baccy to spare, have you? I'm just craving for a smoke, it's making my ears swell."

Lushka did not turn aside or step back or cover her

face with her shawl. She watched calmly while Davidov hurriedly shook some tobacco out of his pouch, then just as calmly said: "Come on, Semyon. And you, Uncle Nikolai, should watch out for thieves, not those who're looking for love in the steppe. It isn't only wrong folk who roam the steppe at night. . . ."

Uncle Nikolai gave a chuckle and patted Lushka familiarly on the shoulder. "But you never know what's going on o' nights, Lushka, my dear. There be some looking for love and others looking for what don't belong to 'em. I'm a watchman, my job's to challenge everyone and guard the mill, because it's got the farm's grain in it, not just a pile of dung. Well, thanks for the baccy. Good luck to you. Hope you get on well. . . ."

"Why the hell do you have to butt in? If you'd stepped aside he might never have recognised you," Davidov said with unconcealed vexation when they were left alone.

"I'm not a kid of sixteen, or an innocent virgin, to be afraid of every old fool's tongue," Lushka answered drily.

"But all the same. . . ."

"What's all the same?"

"Why must you make everything so obvious?"

"He's not my father or my father-in-law, is he?"

"I don't understand you. . . ."

"Try a bit harder then."

Davidov could not see in the darkness, but guessed by the sound of Lushka's voice that she was smiling. Vexed by her indifference towards her own reputation as a woman and her complete contempt for respectability, he exclaimed heatedly, "Look here, you little fool, it's you I'm worrying about."

Even more drily Lushka replied, "You needn't bother. I'll manage somehow. Keep your worrying for yourself."

"I'm worried about myself too."

Lushka stopped abruptly and came up close to him. There was malicious triumph in her voice: "Now you are talking, my dear! It's yourself you are worried about, and you're annoyed because you've been seen out in the steppe at night with a woman. As if Uncle Nikolai cared who you lie with at night!"

"Why do you say that?" he snapped.

"Well, what else is it? Uncle Nikolai is old enough to know you aren't out here with me at night to pick blackberries. And now you're afraid of what the good folk, the honest collective farmers of Gremyachy, will think of you—that's it, isn't it? You don't care a damn about me! If it wasn't me you were bringing out here, it'd be someone else. But you want to sin on the quiet, you want to keep it dark, so that no one will know about your misdeeds. That's the kind of blighter you are! But it won't work, my dear, you can't keep things quiet all your life. And you call yourself a sailor! How can you be like this? I'm not afraid, but you are. So I'm the man and you're the woman, is that it?"

Lushka sounded more amused than hostile, but it was obvious that she had been stung by her lover's conduct. After a short silence, during which she surveyed him with contemptuous sidelong glances, she suddenly slipped off her black sateen skirt and said in an imperative tone, "Undress!"

"Are you off your head?! What for?"

"You can wear my skirt and I'll wear your trousers. That'll be more like it. People ought to dress the way they act in life. Come on, hurry up!"

Though he was smarting from Lushka's words and the exchange she had offered, Davidov laughed. Checking his annoyance, he said quietly, "Stop playing the fool, Lushka! Pull your skirt on and let's go."

With a careless discontented gesture Lushka pulled on her skirt, straightened her hair under her shawl, and suddenly, in a voice full of strangely poignant longing, said, "Oh, you are so dull, you stuffed sailor!"

Then they walked all the way back to the village without saying a word. They parted in a side-street still without speaking. Davidov bowed restrainedly, Lushka gave him a brief nod and disappeared through the gate as if she had melted into the deep shade of the old maple-tree.

For several days they did not meet at all, then one morning Lushka dropped in at the management office and waited patiently in the passage until the last visitor had gone. Davidov was about to shut up the office when he noticed Lushka. She was sitting on a bench, her legs planted wide apart, like a man, her skirt drawn tightly over her shapely knees; she was nibbling sunflower seeds and her face wore a placid smile.

"Want some seeds, chairman?" she asked in a low rippling voice. Her fine brows were twitching slightly and there was a frank gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"Why aren't you out weeding?"

"I'm just going. See, I've got my working clothes on. I came in to tell you something. . . . Come out on the common tonight, when it gets dark. I'll be waiting for you by the Leonovs' threshing floor. Do you know it?"

"Yes."

"Will you come?"

He nodded silently and closed the door firmly. He sat for a long time at his desk, cheeks on fists, staring in front of him in gloomy reflection. And, indeed, he had plenty to think about.

Even before their first quarrel Lushka had twice come to his rooms at dusk and, after sitting with him for a while, had said loudly: "Take me home, Semyon, dear! It's getting dark outside and I'm scared to go alone.

I'm awful scary. It started when I was little, I got scared of the dark. . . ."

He had made a terrible face, rolling his eyes at the partition, behind which his landlady—a religious old woman—was spitting with anger like a cat and clattering the pots and pans as she made supper for her husband and Davidov. Lushka's well-attuned ear caught the landlady's hissing whisper: "Her—scared! The creature's a witch, not a woman! She'd find her own way to any young devil in Hades itself, without him having to look for her. Lord, forgive me for saying it! Her—scary! I'd like to see her scared of the dark, the wicked creature!"

At this unflattering description of herself, Lushka merely smiled. She was not the kind of woman to upset herself over the sneers of some religious old crone. She didn't care two straws for this slobbering hypocrite! In the course of her brief married life the intrepid Lushka had been in many a worse mess than this and had survived far fiercer scuffles with the women of Gremyachy. What if the landlady on the other side of the door called her a witch and a wayward slut?! So be sure, these comparatively inoffensive epithets were not the worst among the choice abuse Lushka had heard, and more often uttered, in her encounters with the indignant wives of Gremyachy who imagined in their blind simplicity that they alone were entitled to love their husbands. Lushka knew how to stand up for herself and always gave her opponent a sound rebuff. No, never under any circumstances had she been at a loss for a cutting reply, and there was not a jealous wife in the whole village who could have put Lushka to shame by snatching the kerchief from her head. . . . Nevertheless, she decided to teach the old woman a lesson, just for form's sake, and to uphold her rule in life that she should always have the last word.

On her next visit she hung back for a minute as they

passed through the landlady's room, letting Davidov go on in front, and when she heard the sound of his boots on the creaking steps of the porch, turned round with the most innocent of expressions to face the mistress of the house. Lushka's reckoning proved correct. The old woman licked her dribbling lips and, without pausing for breath, said: "Well, you are a shameless creature, Lushka! I've never seen the like."

With a show of modesty Lushka lowered her eyes and halted in the middle of the room, as if in thoughtful repentance. Her lashes were so long and black they looked scarcely real, and when she lowered them a deep shadow fell on her pale cheeks.

Deceived by this pretended submission, Filimonovna whispered more tolerantly: "Just look at it yourself, woman. You may be divorced, but how can you think of coming to see a single man at his house, and after dark too! Where's your conscience? Have a little sense and a little shame, for the Lord's sake!"

Imitating the old woman's unctuous tone, Lushka replied: "When God Almighty, our Saviour..." She stopped expectantly and looked up, her eyes glinting in the twilight. At the mention of the deity the devout old woman at once bowed her head and started crossing herself hastily. Then Lushka finished triumphantly in harsh masculine tones: "When God gave out everybody his ration of conscience, I wasn't at home. I was out courting with the boys, kissing and having a good time. So I missed my share, see? Well, what are you gaping at? Can't you shut your mouth? And now listen to this. While your lodger is out with me, while he's suffering in my company, mind you pray for us, sinners, you old cow!"

Lushka swept out without conferring so much as a contemptuous glance on the astonished mistress of the house.

Davidov was waiting for her by the porch. "What were you talking about in there, Lushka?" he asked with some misgivings.

"Oh, about God mostly," Lushka replied, laughing quietly and nestling up to him. She had acquired her former husband's habit of dismissing unwanted topics with a joke.

"No, seriously, what was she whispering about? She wasn't rude to you, was she?"

"She couldn't be rude to me if she tried, she hasn't the guts for that. But she was hissing with jealousy. She's jealous of me because you love me, my gap-toothed darling!" Lushka said, still laughing.

"She suspects us and that's a fact." Davidov shook his head despondently. "You shouldn't have come round to see me here, that's the trouble!"

"Afraid of an old woman?"

"Why should I be?"

"Well, if you're such a hero, there's no need to talk about it."

It was no use arguing with the capricious and whimsical Lushka. Blinded, as if by lightning, by a strong and quite unexpected emotion, Davidov had more than once thought seriously about whether he ought not to go and explain things to Makar and marry Lushka. It would be a way out of the false situation he had placed himself in, and would put a stop to the gossip that might arise round his name. I'll re-educate her! She won't get up to many capers with me. I'll get her interested in social work and make her study, by force if necessary. She'll turn out all right and that's a fact! She's not a stupid woman, and she'll get rid of her hot temper. I'll teach her not to be so fiery. I'm not like Makar. She and Makar were two extremes. I'm a different kind of person, I'll find a fresh approach to her.

But in thinking thus, Davidov obviously overestimated his own and Lushka's abilities.

As soon as he had finished dinner on the day they had agreed to meet by the Leonovs' threshing floor, Davidov started glancing at his watch. Great was his surprise, and afterwards, his wrath, when an hour before the appointed time he heard and recognised Lushka's light tread on the front steps, and then her ringing voice: "Is Comrade Davidov at home?"

Neither the landlady nor her husband, who both happened to be in, made any reply. Davidov grabbed his cap, dashed to the door and found himself face to face with the smiling Lushka. She stepped aside. They walked out of the gate in silence.

"I don't like this game!" Davidov said roughly and even clenched his fists, panting with anger. "Why did you come here? Where did we agree to meet? Answer me, blast you!..."

But Lushka did not lose her temper. "What are you shouting at me for? Who do you think I am—your wife or your coachman?" she retorted.

"Stop it! I'm not shouting, I'm asking you."

Lushka shrugged and with maddening calm replied: "Well, if you aren't going to shout, it's a different matter. I couldn't do without you any longer, so I came early. You ought to be very glad. Aren't you?"

"Like hell I am! My landlady will spread it all round the village! What did you say to her last time that she doesn't even look at me, but just snorts and gives me a plate of swill instead of proper soup? About God, you say? It must have been a very godly conversation if at the mere mention of your name she starts hiccuping and goes blue in the face! And that's a fact, I tell you."

Lushka laughed so youthfully and unrestrainedly that he felt his heart soften in spite of himself. But this time

he was in no mood for joking, and when Lushka, her eyes wet with tears of laughter, asked again: "Hiccups and goes blue in the face, does she? Just what she deserves, the old hypocrite! That'll teach her to keep her nose out of other people's business. Taking it on herself to watch over my conduct!", Davidov interrupted her coldly:

"Is it all the same to you what gossip she spreads round the village about us?"

"As long as she finds it good for her health," Lushka answered carelessly.

"If it's all the same to you, it certainly isn't to me! And you can stop playing the fool and making an exhibition of us! Let me speak to Makar tomorrow, and either we get married or it's good-bye. I can't live with people poking their fingers at me all the time. The chairman of the collective farm—Lushka's lover! Your carrying on in front of everyone like this is striking at the root of my authority, do you understand?"

Lushka flushed deeply and pushed him away.

"A fine bridegroom you are!" she snapped. "What the devil do I want with a sloppy coward like you? You've got some hopes! Afraid to walk through the village with me and all of a sudden it's 'let's get married'! You're scared of everyone you meet, even shake like a jelly at the sight of a few little boys! Well, you can take your authority with you out on the common, behind the Leonovs' barn, and lie there on the grass with it alone, you miserable lout! I thought you were a proper man, but you're like my old Makar. He couldn't think of anything but world revolution, and you're the same with your authority. Any woman would be bored to death with you!"

Lushka was silent for a moment, then said in a voice that had become unexpectedly tender and was trembling with emotion: "Good-bye, Semyon my dear!"

For a few seconds she seemed to hesitate, then turned quickly and walked away down the street with rapid strides.

"Lushka!" he called hoarsely.

At the corner of the street her white kerchief flared for a moment like a spark, then vanished in the darkness. Passing his hand over his face, which had for some reason grown very hot, Davidov stood still, smiling in confusion. Well, I did choose a fine time to make a proposal, fool that I am, he thought. A fine way of getting married, and that's a fact!

Their tiff turned out to be serious. In fact, it was not really a tiff, or even a quarrel, but something very much like a complete break. Lushka steadily avoided meeting Davidov. Soon he moved his lodgings, but even this circumstance, which undoubtedly became known to Lushka, did not dispose her towards reconciliation.

Oh, to hell with her, if she's such a psychological case! he thought angrily, having lost all hope of seeing his beloved anywhere alone. But there was bitterness in his heart and he felt gloomy and dull as on a wet October day. It had not taken Lushka long to find a straight path to Davidov's simple and, in matters of love, inexperienced heart.

True, the prospect of a break had its attractive sides. In the first place, there would be no need to make difficult explanations to Makar Nagulnov; secondly, nothing would then threaten Davidov's authority, which had suffered of late because of his somewhat immoral conduct. These optimistic arguments, however, brought the unhappy Davidov very little consolation. No sooner was he alone than he would begin to stare in front of him with unseeing eyes and a wistful smile would appear on his face as he remembered the hauntingly sweet fragrance

of Lushka's lips, always dry and quivering with life, and the constantly changing expression of her ardent eyes.

Lushka had wonderful eyes! When she lowered her head a little and looked up, there was something touching, an almost childlike helplessness in her glance, and at such moments she herself was more like a girl in her teens than a woman with much experience of life and love-making. But the next moment, adjusting her always spotlessly clean, bleached kerchief with a light touch of the fingers, she would throw up her head and look at him with challenging scorn, and then her glinting, unfriendly eyes would be openly cynical and knowing.

This ability to transform herself instantly was not a piece of highly perfected coquetry with Lushka, it was simply a natural gift. So, at least, it seemed to Davidov. In the blindness of love he failed to notice that his beloved was unusually, perhaps more than necessary, self-possessed, and undoubtedly self-admiring. There were many things that he failed to notice.

One day, waxing lyrical as he kissed Lushka's cheeks, which smelled faintly of face-cream, he had said: "Lushka, darling, you're like a flower! Even your freckles have a scent, and that's a fact! Do you know what they smell of?"

"What?" Lushka asked with interest, raising herself on her elbow.

"A sort of freshness, like the dew or something. . . . You know what—like snowdrops. You can hardly smell it, but it's good."

"That's what I should be like," Lushka announced with dignity and complete seriousness.

Davidov said nothing; he was unpleasantly surprised at such extravagant complacency. A little later he asked: "Why should you?"

"Because I'm beautiful."

"Do you think everyone who's beautiful smells beautiful?"

"I don't know about everyone, I've never smelt them. And why should I? I'm talking about myself, silly. Not everyone who's beautiful has freckles. Freckles come in spring. Of course, they ought to smell of snowdrops."

"You've got a swelled head, and that's a fact!" he said disappointedly. "If you want to know, your cheeks don't smell of snowdrops at all; they smell of turnip and onion and sunflower oil."

"Why do you hang around kissing them then?"

"Because I like turnip and onion."

"Oh, you do talk a lot of nonsense, Semyon, just like a little boy," Lushka said discontentedly.

"A clever person needs a clever person to talk to, you know."

"A clever person is clever even with a fool, and a fool is always a fool whoever he's with," Lushka retorted.

They had quarrelled then too; but that quarrel had been short-lived and in a few minutes had ended in complete reconciliation. This time it was different. Davidov felt that everything he and Lushka had done together belonged to a wonderful but irretrievably distant past. Losing all hope of seeing her alone and sorting out the new situation that had arisen between them, he became thoroughly depressed. Leaving Razmyotnov to look after the affairs of the farm as his deputy, he himself prepared to go out to the second team which was ploughing up the spring fallow on the farm's distant fields.

It was not any matter of business that had prompted his departure. He was running away. It was the shameful flight of a man who desired yet feared the final untying of a love-knot. Davidov, who every now and then caught a glimpse of himself from the side, as it were,

understood all this perfectly well, but he was at the end of his tether and therefore chose the decision that was most acceptable to him, if only because "out there" he would be unable to see Lushka and could hope to live for a few days in comparative peace.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was much rain at the beginning of June, but it was not like summer rain. It fell gently, steadily as in autumn, without wind or thunder. In the morning an ash-blue cloud, ominously white under its dark wings, would creep out from behind the distant hills in the west and grow and spread till it covered half the sky. Then it would descend, so that flakes of it, fine as muslin, caught on the roof of the windmill standing on a mound in the steppe; and somewhere high up, on an almost inaudible note, thunder would murmur amiably and the good rain would fall.

The warm drops, like splashes of milk fresh from the cow, fell steeply on the hushed and misty earth, bubbling white in puddles still foamy from earlier showers; and this frugal summer rain was so mild and peaceful that even the flowers did not bow their heads and the hens in the yards did not seek shelter. With a busy air they would scratch by the sheds and damp-blackened fences in search of food, while the wet and rather bedraggled cocks, regardless of the rain, crowed lengthily, one after the other, and their strident voices mingled with the twittering of sparrows bathing cheerfully in the puddles and with the shrill cries of swallows that dipped in their swift flight towards the fond earth, as if tempted by its scent of dust and rain.

There was a rare, indeed amazing variety of voices among the cocks of Gremyachy Log. It was Lyubish-

kin's cock, always the first awake, who opened the crowing at midnight. His was a gay, ringing tenor, like a keen young company commander's, and he was answered by the solid colonel's baritone of the cock in Agafon Dubtsov's yard; then for about five minutes there would be steady ceaseless crowing all over the village, and only after everyone had had his turn, the oldest cock of all, Maidannikov's plump red rooster, would give a deafening bellow in his husky, domineering general's bass.

Except for lovers and the very sick, which to Nagulnov's way of thinking was pretty much the same thing, the last person in the whole village to go to sleep was Makar Nagulnov himself. Using the leisure that night afforded, he was still conscientiously learning English. On the back of his chair hung a rough towel, in the corner stood a pitcher of cold well water. Learning came hard to Makar. With his shirt unbuttoned he would sit, tousled and perspiring, at his table by the wide-open window, wiping sweat from his forehead, armpits, chest, and back, and now and then, leaning out of the window, pour water from the pitcher over his head and utter a restrained grunt of satisfaction.

The oil lamp burned dimly under its shade of newspaper, the moths beat their wings round it, the old mistress of the house snored placidly in the next room, and word by word Makar wrestled with this terribly difficult language that he was so devilishly set on learning.

It was about midnight one night when he was sitting on the window-sill for a rest and a smoke that the astonished Makar really heard the cocks' chorale for the first time. "Why, it's like being on parade, like a divisional review! It's nothing short of a miracle!..." he exclaimed in delight.

After that, he began to wait for the cocks' reveille every night and listened delightedly to the voices of

these nocturnal singers, though he had nothing but contempt for the lyrical cadences of the nightingale. He particularly enjoyed the general's bass of Maidannikov's rooster, which seemed to sound the final chord of the cockerels' chorus. But one night the order of crowing, to which he had grown accustomed and of which he heartily approved, was violated in a most unexpected and scandalous manner. After the mighty bass, suddenly, quite near by, behind the shed in Arkashka the Barterer's yard next door, some miserable cockerel—one of the youngsters by the sound of it—piped up in a cheeky alto, and then went on for a long time clucking like a hen and making foul screeching noises. In the silence that followed Makar distinctly heard the wretched bird pattering about and flapping its wings in the roost, evidently afraid of losing its balance while squawking.

This was so obvious a breach of discipline and showed such blatant contempt for the laws of subordination that to Makar it was almost as if a real general had been corrected by some half-baked section commander, and a stutterer at that. The outrage was too much for Makar. He was filled with indignation. "Silence!" he bellowed into the darkness, and slammed the window furiously, cursing under his breath.

The next night the incident was repeated, and the night after, the same thing happened again. Twice more Makar roared into the darkness, "Silence!" awakening and frightening the landlady with his shout. The balanced harmony of the cocks' nocturnal roll-call, in which both the voices and the order of answering seemed to be arranged according to rank, was irretrievably disturbed. Makar started going to bed immediately after midnight. It was no use trying to go on studying and memorising outlandish words and phrases. His thoughts revolved round the impudent cock and he reflected furiously that this cock must undoubtedly be just as empty-

headed and stupid as its master. Makar dubbed the innocent creature a scoundrel, a parasite, and an upstart. By daring to give tongue after the "general", the neighbour's cock had put Makar right off his stroke; his progress in the study of English rapidly declined and his temper got worse every day. It was high time to remedy the situation. On the morning of the fourth day Makar went into Arkashka the Barterer's yard, gave him a curt good-morning and said: "Come on, show me that cock of yours."

"What do you want him for?"

"I want to see what he looks like."

"And what the devil's that got to do with you?"

"Come on, let's see him! I've no time for dilly-dallying here with you!" Makar said irritably.

While Makar rolled himself a cigarette Arkashka picked up a twig and not without difficulty drove a motley crowd of fine-feathered fowl out from under the barn. Just as Makar had thought! Among a dozen gawdily feathered, frivolous and coquettish hens strutted a bedraggled dun-coloured little cock. Makar surveyed it with undisguised contempt.

"Slit that little runt's throat!" he advised Arkashka.

"What for?"

"For your broth," Makar replied briefly.

"But why? He's the only one I've got and he's keen on the hens."

Makar smiled ironically, his lip curling.

"Keen on the hens! Very important, I must say. He doesn't need to be very clever for that."

"But that's all that's expected of him. I don't want him for ploughing up my patch, he couldn't pull even a single-share plough. . . ."

"Don't try to be funny! Two can play at that game, you know!"

"Well, what harm's that cock been doing you?" Arkashka asked in a more impatient tone. "Got in your way, or something?"

"He's a fool, he has no regard for discipline."

"What discipline? Does he fly into your landlady's garden, or what?"

"He doesn't do that, but—er. . . ."

Makar found it difficult to explain just what discipline he had in mind. For a minute he stood in silence, his feet planted wide apart, casting withering glances at the unfortunate bird, then he had a sudden idea.

"Do you know what, neighbour?" he said to Arkashka, brightening up. "Let's swop cocks."

"And where might there be a cock in your horseless establishment?" Arkashka asked with some interest.

"There'll be one, and not such a draggle-tail as this thing you've got here."

"All right then, bring it along and we'll change—if your cock comes up to the mark. I'm not sticking to mine."

Half an hour later Makar dropped in as if by chance to see Akim Beskhlebnov, who had a great number of fowls in his yard. While he chatted about this and that, Makar kept a sharp eye on the birds that were pecking about the yard and listened attentively to the voices of the cocks. All five of Beskhlebnov's cocks were of fine stature and impressive colouring, and what was more, they were all moderately voluble and, by the look of them, extremely well-disciplined in their habits. Before taking his leave, Makar suggested: "Look here, will you sell me one of your cocks?"

"Why, certainly, Comrade Nagulnov, but a hen goes better in cabbage soup, if you ask me. Choose any of them you like, my old woman's got no end of them."

"No, all I want is a cock. Just lend me a sack, will you, to carry him in."

A little while later Makar was standing in Arkashka the Barterer's yard, untying the sack. Arkashka, whose passion for barter was well known to all, was rubbing his hands in anticipation and murmuring, "Let's see what this trump of yours is like. Mebbe I'll have to ask you to make up the difference. Hurry up with that sack now. What are you fiddling there with? I'll catch my cock in a minute, and we'll make 'em fight. The one whose bird wins gets a drink on the deal. I'm blowed if I'll change otherwise! What sort of looks has yours got? Big fellow, eh?"

"Grenadier!" Makar grunted shortly, tugging at the tightly-drawn knot with his teeth.

Arkashka hitched up his trousers and trotted off to the hen-house. In a minute the wild squawking of the cock was heard from inside. But when Arkashka returned, clasping the terrified and panting bird to his chest, Makar was standing over the open sack, scratching the back of his neck in perplexity. The "grenadier" lay with his wings outspread, rolling his round orange eyes in mortal agony.

"What's wrong with him?" asked the astonished Arkashka.

"Had a misfire!"

"Not much of a bird, eh?"

"I'm telling you it's a misfire."

"How can a cock have a misfire? Don't be datt!"

"Not the cock, you fool. It's me who's had the misfire. I was carrying him in the sack and he thought he'd start crowing and make an ass of me in front of everyone when we were passing the management office, so I twisted his neck a bit, just a bit, you know. And see what's happened. Bring the chopper here quick, or he'll peg out and be no good for anything."

Makar tossed the decapitated cock over the fence and shouted to his landlady who was busy on the steps:

"Hey, mother! Pluck him while he's warm, we'll have chicken broth tomorrow."

Without a word to Arkashka he again directed his steps to Beskhlebnov's. At first Beskhlebnov objected: "If you go on like this, you'll widow all my hens." But eventually he agreed to sell another cock. The exchange with Arkashka was negotiated, and a few minutes later Arkashka's cock flew headless over the fence, and the vastly satisfied Makar shouted to his landlady: "Take this plaguy creature, mother! Pluck his feathers, the undisciplined upstart, and into the pot with him!"

Makar walked out into the street with the air of one who had performed a great and necessary task. Amazed at the bloody treatment that Makar had meted out to the cocks in their yard, Arkashka's wife watched him go, shaking her head sadly. In answer to her silent question, Arkashka put a finger to his forehead, turned it back and forth and whispered: "Off his rocker! Good man, but off his rocker. Gone right out of his mind. Sitting up at night like that, the poor chap! It was them English languages that did for him, may there be a curse on them!"

From then on, bravely enduring his loneliness, Makar listened unhindered to the nocturnal crowing of the cocks. All day he would work in the fields, weeding the corn side by side with the women and children, and in the evening, after a supper of meatless cabbage soup and milk, he would sit down to his English textbook and pass the time patiently until midnight. Presently he was joined by Grandad Shchukar. One evening Shchukar knocked quietly at the door and asked: "May I come in?"

"Come in. What do you want?" Makar asked, not very cordially.

"Well, how shall I put it . . ." the old man began hesitantly. "Mebbe I've been missing you, Makar, old chap.

And I saw a light, so I says to meself, suppose I drop in and see how he's gettin' on?"

"What are you—a woman? Pining for me like this?"

"An old man feels lonelier sometimes than any woman. And I've got such a dull job, being with them horses all the time. I'm fed up to the eyebrows with the dumb creatures, that I am! You say a friendly word to 'em, but they never reply, just go on chewin' their oats and swishin' their tails. What's the use of that to me? And then there's that goat, drat the fiend! Do you think that pest ever goes to sleep, Makar, old chap? As soon as you close your eyes at night, there he comes, the devil. The number of times he's trodden on me when I've been asleep! It scares you out of your life. By the time he's done with you, you couldn't get to sleep even with your eyes blindfold. I never knowed such a pest, there's no peace from him! He's amblin' round the stables and the hayloft all night long. Let's cut his throat, Makar, old chap."

"Keep out of here with that kind of talk, Shchukar. I'm not in charge of the management's goats. Davidov's in command there, you'd better go and see him."

"Oh no, Lord forbid! I didn't come about the goat, Makar. I just wanted to see you. You give me an interesting book to read and I'll sit here beside you, quiet as a mouse. It'll be more cheerful for you and for me too. I won't bother you one little bit!"

Makar thought for a moment and gave his consent. Handing Shchukar a thick dictionary of the Russian language, he said: "All right, sit here with me and read, but only to yourself and don't open your lips and don't cough and don't sneeze—in short, not a murmur! We'll smoke when I give the word. Have I made myself clear?"

"Quite clear, Makar. But what about this sneezing? Suppose the devil plays a trick on me and I happen to sneeze? What then? In this job of mine my nostrils are

always full of hay dust. Sometimes I even sneeze in my sleep. What shall we do about that?"

"Out you go into the passage, like a bullet!"

"Eh, Makar, you can't make much of a bullet out of me. I'm too rusty! While I'm running into the passage, I'll sneeze ten times and blow my nose five."

"You'll have to hurry up then, granfer!"

"A girl was in a hurry to get married, but couldn't find a husband. An obliging chap came along and helped her in her trouble. Do you know what happened to that girl even without gettin' married? She turned into a spanking' fine woman! And that's what may happen to me. I'll hurry, but I can't answer for what might happen if I strain myself runnin'. Then you'll turn me out of here double quick, I can see it as plain as the nose on your face!"

Makar burst out laughing. "You be careful how you hurry, you mustn't risk your dignity like that. In short, keep quiet and don't interrupt me. Get on with your reading and make yourself a cultured old man."

"There's just one more little question—may I? Don't frown like that, Makar, old chap, it's the last one."

"Well? Out with it!"

Grandad Shchukar shifted awkwardly on the bench. "Well, it's like this," he mumbled. "It's nothing very much really, but—you see—my old woman gets mighty cross about it. 'I can't sleep because of you,' she says. But what have I got to do with it, may I ask?"

"Keep to the point, can't you?"

"But this is the point. Because of my rupture, or meb-be from some other disease, I get the most awful collywobbles in the stomach—rumbles like a thunder-cloud, it does. Now what are we goin' to do about that? That'll distract you from your studies, too, you know."

"Into the passage straight away, and none of your thunder and lightning! Have I made myself clear?"

Shchukar nodded his head in silence, then sighed deeply and opened the dictionary. At midnight, under Makar's guidance and with the aid of his explanations, Grandad Shchukar for the first time listened to the cocks in the proper manner, and three days later they were both listening together, leaning over the window-sill shoulder to shoulder, and Grandad Shchukar was whispering in awed delight: "Goodness me! Well, I never! Here am I, been treadin' on them cocks' tails all my life, always been with chickens ever since I was a boy, and I never guessed what beauty there was in their cock-a-doodle-doo. But now I understand it. That Maidannikov's devil, Makar—what a voice he's got, eh! Just like General Brusilov's!"

Makar frowned but did not raise his voice above a whisper: "Humph! You should have heard our generals, granfer. Now, there were some real voices for you! But what was your Brusilov? In the first place, he was a former tsarist general, so he's suspect as far as I'm concerned, and in the second place, he was a bespectacled intellectual. He probably had a voice like that cock of Arkashka's we had for supper. You've got to judge voices from the political point of view, too. For example, we once had a bass in our division—the best in the whole army! But he turned out a scoundrel—deserted to the enemy. Do you think I consider him a good bass now? Not a bit of it! Now he's just a damn falsetto, not a bass."

"But cocks haven't got anything to do with politics, Makar, have they?" Grandad Shchukar asked timidly.

"Oh yes, they have. If that was some kulak bird instead of Maidannikov's cock, I wouldn't listen to him to save my life, the parasite. He wouldn't appeal to me a bit, the kulak toady. Well, that's enough talking. Sit

down and read your book, and I'll read mine, and don't ask me any more stupid questions or I'll turn you out without mercy."

Grandad Shchukar soon became a zealous devotee and connoisseur of cock crowing. It was he who persuaded Makar to go and look at Maidannikov's cock. They walked into Maidannikov's yard with a business-like air. Kondrat Maidannikov was in the fields, ploughing the spring fallow. Makar spoke to Kondrat's wife, asked in passing why she wasn't out weeding and himself attentively examined the cock that was strutting importantly about the yard. It was a cock of impressive and dignified appearance, with luxurious red plumage. Makar left, well satisfied with his inspection. As he walked out of the gate, he nudged Shchukar with his elbow and asked: "What do you think of him?"

"Why, he looks as good as he sounds. A real archbishop."

Though highly displeased at the comparison, Makar made no comment. They had almost reached the management office, when Shchukar, his eyes bulging with fright, clutched Makar's sleeve.

"Makar, they may kill him!"

"Who?"

"The cock, God have mercy! They'll kill him, easy as winkin'! They're sure to!"

"What do you mean, 'kill him'? Why should they? What are you blathering about?"

"But can't you see? He's as old as a dunghill, he's the same age as me, if not older. I remember that cock from the time when I was a boy!"

"Come off it, Shchukar. Cocks don't live to seventy, that's unnatural. Understand?"

"All the same he's old, all the feathers in his beard are grey—or didn't you notice?" Grandad Shchukar retorted hotly.

Makar turned sharply on his heel. His strides were so long and rapid that Shchukar, who hurried after him, was from time to time obliged to break into a trot. In a few minutes they again entered Maidannikov's yard. Makar was mopping perspiration from his forehead with a lace handkerchief that Lushka had left behind; Grandad Shchukar, his mouth wide open, was panting like a hound after half a day's fox-hunt. Small drops of saliva dripped from his purple tongue on to his beard.

Kondrat's wife came up to them with a friendly smile.

"Did you forget something?"

"I forgot to tell you something, Prokhorovna, and it's this: don't think of killing your cock."

Grandad Shchukar puffed out his chest, stretched forth his arm and, wagging a dirty forefinger and breathing hard, croaked: "God forbid! . . ."

Makar glanced at him with displeasure and went on: "We want to buy him off you, or exchange him, so that we can have him in the collective farm for breeding. Judging by his feathering, he's got thoroughbred blood in him. Mebbe his ancestors were even imported from England or Holland or somewhere like that, for raising a new breed here. Dutch ganders have bumps on their noses, haven't they? Of course, they have. Well, maybe this cock's from Holland too—you don't know, do you? And neither do I; so he mustn't be killed, not under any circumstances."

"Bút he's no good for breeding, he's too old. We were going to kill him for Trinity Sunday and get a young one instead."

At that, Grandad Shchukar nudged Makar with his elbow, as much as to say: "What did I tell you?" But Makar ignored him and went on trying to persuade the cock's mistress.

"Old age is nothing to hold against him. We'll have him for breeding. We'll feed him up properly on wheat

soaked in vodka, and he'll start running after those hens like the lusty fellow he is. In short, on no account must that valuable cock be destroyed. Do I make myself clear? Good! And as for a young cock, Grandad Shchukar here will bring you one in a little while."

The same day Makar went to see Dyomka Ushakov's wife, bought one of her spare cocks at a reasonable price and sent it to the Maidannikovs by Grandad Shchukar.

It seemed that the last obstacle had been overcome. But then a mischievous rumour got round the village that Makar Nagulnov was for some unknown purpose buying up cocks everywhere, wholesale and retail, and moreover, paying fantastic prices for them. Now, how could Razmyotnov, who was always ready for a joke, fail to respond to such a situation? On hearing of the extraordinary whim of his friend, he decided to verify everything personally and, late in the evening, put in an appearance at Nagulnov's cottage.

Makar and Grandad Shchukar were sitting at the table, poring over bulky volumes. The wick of the lamp was turned up too high. Black flakes of soot were flying about the room, a smell of burnt paper rose from the scorched shade that was touching the lamp glass and there reigned a silence such as is found only in the first class of an elementary school during the first writing lesson. Razmyotnov opened the door without knocking, and coughed. Neither of the assiduous students paid any attention to him. Standing in the doorway, scarcely able to restrain a smile, he asked loudly: "Does Comrade Nagulnov live here?"

Makar raised his head and glanced keenly at Razmyotnov's face. No, the nocturnal visitor was not drunk, but his lips were twitching with an irresistible desire to burst out laughing. A dull gleam appeared in Makar's narrowed eyes "You go and sit with the village girls,

Andrei," he said calmly. "I've got no time to waste on you."

Seeing that Makar was not in the least inclined to share his high spirits, Razmyotnov sat down on a bench and, lighting a cigarette, asked seriously: "No, honestly, why did you buy them?"

"For broth and soup. Did you think I wanted to make ice-cream of them for the young ladies of the village?"

"No, I didn't think that, but I was mighty surprised. What's he want so many cocks for, I thought, and why must they be only cocks?"

Makar smiled. "I like cocks' combs in my broth, that's all. You were mighty surprised about my purchases, but look here, Andrei, I was mighty surprised to find you don't come out weeding."

"What do you expect me to do there—watch over the women? There are team-leaders for that."

"Not watch over them, but weed yourself."

Razmyotnov waved the idea aside with a good-humoured laugh.

"You want me to go pulling up rape with them? Spare me that, old chap! That's not a man's job, and besides, I'm not just anyone, I'm chairman of the village Soviet."

"Not a very big bug that. A bug without the 'big', I should call it. If I can pull up rape and other weeds along with the women, why can't you?"

Razmyotnov shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not that I can't, I just don't want to make a fool of myself in front of the other Cossacks."

"Davidov doesn't turn up his nose at any kind of work, neither do I. Why should you tilt your cap over your ear and sit on your backside all day in that office of yours, or tuck your dirty old brief-case under your arm and go wandering about the village like a lost soul! Can't your secretary issue chits without you? You just

drop these little games, Andrei! Get into that first team tomorrow and show the women how the heroes of the Civil War can work!"

"Are you mad or joking? You can kill me here on the spot, but I wouldn't go!" Razmyotnov threw his cigarette-end angrily on the floor and jumped to his feet. "I won't be made a laughing-stock! Weeding's not a man's job! You'll be telling me to go and hoe potatoes next."

Calmly tapping the table with a stump of a pencil, Makar said: "Any job the Party sends you to is a man's job. Suppose they say to me, 'Nagulnov, go and cut down those counter-revolutionaries.' I'll go gladly. Suppose they say, 'Go and hoe potatoes,' I'll go, not gladly, but I'll go. Suppose they say, 'Go and milk the cows,' I'll gnash my teeth, but I'll still go! I'll tug that wretched cow's tits this way and that, but to the best of my ability I'll milk the creature!"

Razmyotnov's wrath cooled, and he recovered his good humour.

"Milk a cow with a couple of fists like yours? Why, you'd knock her over in a jiffy!"

"If I knocked her over, I'd pick her up again, but I'd go on milking her till I won the day, till I'd squeezed every drop of milk out of her. Understand?" And without waiting for an answer, Makar went on thoughtfully: "Think about what I've said, Andrei, and don't go getting too many fine ideas into your head about your being a man and a Cossack and all that. That's not the meaning of Party honour, as I see it. The other day I was going to the district centre to see the new Party secretary. On the way I happened to meet Filonov, the secretary of the Tubyanskoy Party organisation. 'Where are you heading for?' he asked me. 'Not the district committee?' That's it, I says. 'To see the new secretary?' Right again, I says. 'Well, turn off into our hayfield,

that's where he is.' And he points to the left off the road with his whip. I take a look, and there they are mowing for all they're worth—six mowing-machines at it. What, have you gone crazy, mowing so early? I ask. And he says: 'That's not grass there, it's steppe weed and a lot of other rubbish, so we've decided to mow it for the silo.' Did you think of that yourselves, I ask. 'No,' he says, 'the secretary came down yesterday, inspected all our fields and came across that steppe weed, then he started asking us what we were going to do with it. We said we'd plough it in, and he laughed and said that wasn't much of an idea and it would be better to mow it for the silo.' "

Makar fell silent, eyeing Razmyotnov keenly.

"Well, did you see him?" Razmyotnov asked impatiently.

"Of course! I turned off the road, went on about two kilometres and soon I caught sight of two carts. An old fellow was cooking up some porridge on a fire and a lad as strong as a bull was lying under one of the carts with his feet up, swatting flies with a twig. He didn't look much like a Party secretary, lying there barefoot, with a face round as a cheese, so I asked for the secretary. This lad grins at me. 'He's been at it ever since the morning on my mower,' he says. 'There he is, out in the steppe, mowing away.' So I got off my horse and tethered him to one of the carts. Then I went over to the mowers. The first machine went by with an old fellow sitting on it in a straw hat and a ragged sweaty shirt and canvas trousers, all smeared with grease. Clear enough he wasn't the secretary. On the next one there was a shaven-headed lad without a shirt on and sweating so that he looked as if he'd had oil poured all over him—gleaming in the sun like a sword, he was. That can't be the secretary, I thought. No secretary would drive a mowing-machine without a shirt on. But I looked down

the line and none of the others had shirts on either! Well, that was a problem—just try and guess which of them is the secretary. I thought I'd be able to tell him by his intellectual appearance, but I had to let them all go past. And I'll be damned if I could say which he was! All of them with their backs bare, all of them as like each other as copper coins, and none of them was wearing a label saying he was the secretary. So much for intellectual appearance! They might all have been intellectuals. Shave the head of the longest-haired priest and put him in a soldiers' bath-house—do you think you'll find that priest again? And it was just the same here."

"You keep off the religious heads, Makar, old chap, it's a sin!" Grandad Shchukar, who till now had preserved complete silence, protested timidly.

Makar shot a wrathful glance in his direction and went on: "So I went back to the carts and asked the lad which of the mowers was the secretary. And he, the fat-faced bumpkin, said the secretary was the one without a shirt on. Rub your eyes, you've got cobwebs on them, I told him, no one on the machines has a shirt on, except the old man. So the lad crawled out from under the cart and rubbed his eyes, and then—how he laughed! While I had been walking back to the carts, the old fellow had taken his shirt and hat off, too, and there he was, way ahead of everyone, in nothing but his trousers, his bald patch gleaming, and the wind blowing his grey beard out behind him. Like a swan sailing across the steppe he was. Well, this is news, I thought! Here's a fine townsman's custom the district Party secretary has brought us—riding about the steppe half-naked. And even the flabby old grandpa there has let himself be tempted. Well, the lad led me over and pointed out the secretary. I went up to him and walked along beside his machine, introduced myself and told him I was on my way to the district committee to meet him. He laughed,

stopped the horses and said; 'Get up and drive. We'll mow and get to know each other at the same time, Comrade Nagulnov.' I sent the lad who was driving away, climbed up in his place and started the horses. Well, by the time we had been up and down four times, we got to know each other. . . . He's a grand chap! We've never had a secretary like him. 'I'll show you how they work in the Stavropol region,' he says. 'You like to look grand, but we look to the land.' And he laughed. That remains to be seen, I said to him. Pride goes before a fall, you know. He asked a bit about everything, then he said: 'Go home, Comrade Nagulnov, I'll soon be visiting you.' "

"And what else did he say?" Razmyotnov asked with interest.

"Nothing special. Oh yes, he asked about Khoprov. Had he been an active political worker? Active political worker? I says. I should think not."

"What did he say to that?"

"He asked why they killed him, and his wife too. All sorts of things the kulaks might kill a man for, I says. He didn't suit their book, so they killed him."

"And then what did he say?"

"Sucked his lip as if he'd had a bite out of a sour apple, and coughed or muttered something like 'h'm, h'm', but didn't say anything that made sense."

"How did he get to hear about the Khoprovs, I wonder."

"Hanged if I know. The district GPU must have told him."

Razmyotnov smoked another cigarette in silence. He was thinking about something so intently that he had even forgotten why he had come to see Nagulnov. When he left, he said with a smile, looking Nagulnov straight in the eye: "I've sorted everything out. I'll be with the first team at the crack of dawn tomorrow. Don't worry,

Makar, I'll do that weeding with a will. But you'll have to stand me a bottle of vodka on Sunday, remember."

"I'll do that, and we'll drink it together, if you weed well. But be out early tomorrow, set the women an example of how to turn up for work. Well, good luck to you!" And Makar again plunged into his reading.

Near midnight, in the unbroken stillness that reigned over the village, he and Grandad Shchukar listened solemnly to the first cocks and each in his own way rejoiced at their harmonious crowing.

"Like an archbishop's choir!" Shchukar whispered reverently, lisping with emotion.

"Like a cavalry regiment!" Makar said, gazing dreamily at the soot-caked glass of the lamp.

Thus was conceived a wonderful and unusual passion that soon very nearly cost Makar his life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Only Razmyotnov saw Davidov off on his journey. The cart was making the trip in any case to bring the ploughmen food from the collective-farm store, and any clean linen or clothes their families had to send them.

Davidov sat on the edge of the cart, his legs in scratched, rusty-looking top-boots dangling over the side; his shoulders were hunched like an old man's and the glances he cast about him were apathetic and indifferent. His shoulder-blades jutted out from under the jacket that was draped over them, his hair had not been cut for a long time and thick black curls dangled from under the cap on the back of his head, reaching down his broad brown neck to the greasy collar of his jacket. There was something unpleasant and wretched in his whole appearance.

Razmyotnov regarded him, frowning as if in pain. Lushka's pulled him to pieces all right, he thought. Curse that woman! What a wreck she's made of the fellow! Why, there's nothing left of him! That's love for you, that's where it gets you. He was a man once, now he's no better than a cabbage stump.

If anyone knew in detail just "where love gets you" it was Razmyotnov. He remembered Marina Poyarkova and one or two other past experiences, heaved a sigh, then smiled cheerfully and went off to see what was happening at the village Soviet. On the way he bumped into Makar Nagulnov. Spare and erect as usual, showing off a little with his perfect military bearing, Makar offered Razmyotnov his hand and nodded in the direction of the departing cart.

"Seen what Comrade Davidov has come to?"

"Lost a bit of weight," Razmyotnov answered evasively.

"When I was in his position, I lost weight every day too. And he's only a weakling! One foot in the grave already. Why, he used to live in my house, he saw what sort of a menace she was, he saw me battling with that domestic counter-revolutionary all the time, and now he's in a mess! And what a mess! When I looked at him just now, believe me, my heart bled for him. Thin as a rake, that guilty look all over him, his eyes darting this way and that, and his trousers—God knows how he keeps them up, the poor fellow! The lad's melting away before our very eyes! We ought to have included that former wife of mine in the de-kulakisation last winter and sent her off with her Timofei the Torn to a cold place. Mebbe she'd have cooled off a bit out there."

"But I thought you didn't know."

"Didn't know! Bah! As if I wouldn't know when everyone else knew! Do I go about with my eyes shut? It doesn't matter a rap to me who the bitch picks up with,

but she's not going to lay hands on my Davidov, she's not going to ruin a friend of mine. That's how the matter stands at the present moment."

"You ought to have warned him. Why didn't you say something?"

"I couldn't do that! Why, you never know, he might have thought I was trying to set him against her out of jealousy or something. But why didn't you, a disinterested party, speak up? Why didn't you give him a strict warning?"

"With a reprimand thrown in?" Razmyotnov grinned.

"He'll get himself a reprimand elsewhere if he lets himself slide any farther. It's up to you and me, Andrei, to give him a friendly warning. There's no time to lose. With that Lushka around, she's such a bitch he'll not only miss the world revolution, he may even kick the bucket altogether. He'll get himself a dose of galloping consumption or syphilis or something, mark my words. When I got shot of her, it was like being born again: I'm not afraid of any of those venereal diseases, I'm getting on fine at English, I've achieved a lot by my own efforts without any teachers, and I'm keeping Party affairs in order and I don't turn my nose up at other work. In a word, being a bachelor as I am, my hands and feet are free and my head's clear. But when I was living with her, though I didn't drink vodka, I felt as if I had a hang-over every day. Women for us revolutionaries, they're just the opium of the people. And if I had my way, I'd have that statement put into the Party rules in bold type, for every Communist, for every real Party member to read it three times over before he went to bed at night, and three times in the morning, on an empty stomach. Then we wouldn't have any poor devil getting into such a tangle as our dear Comrade Davidov has got himself into now. Just think yourself, Andrei, how many good men have suffered from that cursed breed of

women! You couldn't count 'em! How many cases of embezzlement they've caused, how many drunkards they've created, how many Party reprimands have been served out to good fellows because of them, how many people there are in gaol through their doing—why, it's a shuddering nightmare!"

Razmyotnov became thoughtful. For a time they walked on in silence, giving themselves up to memories of the distant and recent past, of women they had encountered on their paths through life. Makar Nagulnov distended his nostrils, pressed his thin lips tightly together and marched along as if he were in the ranks, with firm, even tread. He was the personification of aloofness. Razmyotnov, however, now smiled, now waved his hand despairingly, now twirled his fair curly moustache and screwed up his eyes like a contented cat, and sometimes, evidently recalling some particularly vivid memory of one woman or another, he merely grunted, as if he had drained a large glass of vodka, and then, between long pauses, he would exclaim obscurely: "Well, I'll be damned! What a woman! The little witch!..."

Gremyachy Log dropped out of sight behind a low rise, and the broad steppe stretching farther than the eye could see folded Davidov in its embrace. Breathing deep of the heady scents of the grass and the moist black earth, Davidov gazed at the long line of ancient burial mounds in the distance. Those distant blue barrows reminded him in some way of the storm-roused waves of the Baltic and, unable to fight a sudden rush of melancholy, he sighed heavily and quickly averted his misty eyes.... Then his absent gaze focused on a faint dot high up in the sky. Majestic in its solitude, a black steppe eagle—dweller of burial mounds—hovered in the cold heavens, slowly, barely perceptibly losing height as it circled earthwards. Its broad, blunt-tipped wings, mo-

tionlessly outspread, bore it lightly in that lofty region just below the clouds, and the headwind licked greedily at the powerful big-boned body and flattened its black, dully gleaming plumage. As it swept in broad turns towards the east, the sun's rays caught it from the front and below, and it seemed to Davidov that glittering white sparks flew from the whitish underside of its wings.

Steppe, the boundless, rolling steppe. Ancient barrows in a light-blue mist. A black eagle in the sky. The soft rustle of wind-blown grass. . . . Davidov felt very small and lost in this huge expanse, as he gazed wistfully over the tormentingly endless plain. His love for Lushka, the grief of parting, the unrealised desire to see her, now seemed trivial and unimportant. He was oppressed by a feeling of loneliness, of isolation from the whole living world. Something like this he had experienced long ago, when he had stood watch at night in the bows of his ship. What a long time ago that had been! It seemed like an old, half-forgotten dream.

The warmth of the sun became more perceptible. The soft south wind freshened. Without noticing it, Davidov let his head droop and dozed, as the cart jogged along over the ruts and pot-holes in the neglected steppeland road.

The horses he had been given were wretched animals; his driver—an old collective farmer Ivan Arzhanov—was taciturn and, in the general opinion of the village, slightly touched. He took great care of the horses he had only recently been entrusted with, and all the way to the field camp they moved at such a tediously slow pace that by the time they had gone half way Davidov, waking from his doze, could not help asking grimly: "Do you think you're carrying pots to a fair, Uncle Ivan? Afraid of breaking them? Why do you keep the horses walking all the time?"

Arzhanov looked away and for a long time was silent.

"I know what kind of 'pot' I'm carrying," he answered at last, in a grating voice. "You may be chairman of the farm, but you won't make me gallop without need, that you won't!"

"Who's asking you to 'gallop without need'? But you might let 'em trot a bit going downhill. You're not carrying anything, the cart's as good as empty, and that's a fact."

After another long silence Arzhanov said unwillingly: "A horse knows itself when it should walk and when it should trot."

Davidov began to get really annoyed. No longer hiding his indignation, he exclaimed: "That's grand, that is! And what are you for? What have you got a pair of reins in your hands for? Why are you sitting here, wearing the seat out? Come on, give me the reins."

More willingly Arzhanov replied: "I've got reins in my hands to guide the horses with so that they'll go where they ought to go and not where they ought not to. And if you don't like me sitting next to you and wearing the seat out, I can get down and walk along beside the cart on foot, but I won't give you the reins, that I won't."

"Why won't you?" Davidov asked, vainly trying to see the stubbornly averted face of the driver.

"Would you give me your reins?"

"What reins?" Davidov asked, failing to understand.

"As if you didn't know! You've the reins of the whole farm in your hands, the people have entrusted you to manage everything we've got. Would you let anyone else have those reins? Of course, you wouldn't. 'That I won't!' you'd say. And I'm the same. I don't ask you for your reins, do I? So don't you ask for mine!"

Davidov grinned broadly. Not a trace of his recent anger remained.

"Well, and suppose there was a fire in the village, would you drive your barrel of water at the same shameful pace?" he asked, awaiting the reply with interest.

"They don't send people like me for water when there's a fire. . . ."

And at that moment, glancing sideways at Arzhanov, Davidov noticed for the first time, somewhere below the old man's peeling weather-beaten cheeks, the fine wrinkles of a carefully restrained smile.

"Who d'you think they'd send then?"

"People like you and Makar Nagulnov."

"Why's that?"

"You're the only two in the village who like to drive fast; you live at a gallop yourselves. . . ."

Davidov laughed heartily, slapping his knees and throwing back his head. Before he had recovered his breath, he asked: "So if a fire really breaks out in the village, there'll be only Makar and me to put it out?"

"No, why should there be? You and Makar will be the ones to cart the water—galloping your horses for all you're worth, scattering their foam all over the place—but it'll be us, the collective farmers, who'll do the putting out. Some with a bucket, some with a hook, and some with an axe. . . . And the man in charge will be Razmyotnov, there's no one else fit for the job."

And he's supposed to be touched! Davidov thought in genuine astonishment. After a minute's silence he asked:

"Why do you choose Razmyotnov specially to be in charge of the fire brigade?"

"You're a clever lad, but you're not very quick on the uptake," Arzhanov replied, now chuckling openly. "A man gets his job during a fire according to the way he lives, according to his character. Now you and Makar live at a gallop, you're never at peace day or night, and you don't give o'hers any peace either, so for you, being the liveliest and nippiest of us all, a smart bit of water-

carrying is just the job. You can't put a fire out without water, can you now? But Andrei Razmyotnov, he lives at a trot, easy-does-it-like, he won't do more than he needs, not until you show him the whip. . . . So what else is there for him to do in the lofty position he holds now? Hands on his hips and give orders, make a fuss and confusion, get in everybody's way—that's his job. But we, the people, that is, are taking things quietly for the time being, just jogging along at a walk, so it's for us to do our job without a lot of fuss and bother and put the fire out. . . ."

Davidov slapped Arzhanov on the back, pulled him round and looked closely into a pair of cunning laughing eyes and a kindly bearded face. Smiling reservedly, Davidov said, "Well, Uncle Ivan, you seem to be a sly one!"

"And you aren't such a simpleton either, Davidov!" Arzhanov responded.

They were still crawling along at a snail's space, but Davidov, realising there was nothing he could do about it, no longer tried to hurry Arzhanov. Now he would jump down from the cart and walk along beside it, now he would climb on again. As they talked about the affairs of the farm and, gradually, about life in general, Davidov became more and more convinced that his driver was a man of by no means defective brain-power; about everything he reasoned clearly and sensibly but always from his own peculiar point of view. When the field camp showed up in the distance with a fine braid of smoke from the ploughing team's kitchen curling over it, Davidov asked: "Seriously though, Uncle Ivan, have you been driving your horses at a walk all your life?"

"I have that."

"Why didn't you tell me before about this speciality of yours? I wouldn't have come with you, that's a fact I wouldn't."

"Why should I praise myself beforehand? Now you've seen the way I drive for yourself. One drive with me is enough, you won't want another."

"What was it made you like this?" Davidov said with a grin.

Instead of giving a direct answer Arzhanov said evasively: "I had a neighbour in the old days. He was a carpenter, and a bit too fond of the bottle. Fine pair of hands, but drank like a fish. He'd keep off it for a time, then as soon as he got a whiff of the stuff, he'd be at it for a month! Sell his last shirt for a drink, he would, bless his heart!"

"Well?"

"And his son never took a drop."

"All right, that's enough of the parables; make it simple."

"You couldn't have it much simpler than this. My late parent was mad on hunting, and he was even madder on riding. When he was serving in his regiment, he always used to walk off with all the first prizes for racing, swordsmanship, and trick riding. And when he came back from the regiment, he took all the first prizes at the stanitsa races every year. But he was a troublesome man, rest his soul; I say that myself, though he was my own father. One of the real dashing Cossacks he was. . . . He used to heat up a nail in the stove every morning to curl his whiskers with. He liked to cut a dash in front of people, specially the women. . . . And how he could ride! Never another like him! Suppose he had to go into the stanitsa on business. He'd bring his old army horse out of the stable, put a saddle on it—and off he'd go like a bullet! He'd race round the yard, leap over the fence, and away he'd go—a cloud of dust whirling behind him. He'd never ridden at a trot or a walk in his life. Twenty-four versts to the stanitsa it was; he'd do it at a gallop, and back the same way. He liked riding

after hares just for the thrill of it. Not wolves, mind you, but hares! He'd start up that hare somewhere in the long grass, keep it away from the gully, then ride it down and either slash it with his whip or trample it under the horse's hoofs. The number of times he fell when he was going at full gallop and hurt himself badly! But he wouldn't give up his amusement. It certainly cost us something in horses. In my memory he did in six horses; either rode 'em to death or lamed 'em. And, of course, we were ruined. One winter he killed two horses right out. They stumbled at full gallop, crashed down on the frozen earth—and that was that! We'd look out of the window, and there was father walking home with his saddle over his shoulder. Mother used to start a wailing for the dead horse but it was nothing to father! He'd keep to his bed for three days, grumble and grunt a bit, and before the bruises healed on his body, he'd be off hunting again."

"If the horses were killed, how did he manage to come out alive?"

"A horse is a heavy animal. When a horse falls at a gallop, it'll turn three somersaults before it comes to rest. But father, he'd just take his feet out of the stirrups and fly like a swallow. Of course he'd come down with a bump and lie there as long as need be before he came to his senses, but then he'd get up and make for home on foot. He was a daredevil! And his bones were like iron rivets."

"He must have been tough," Davidov said admiringly.

"Aye, that he was, but there were other people tougher."

"What d'you mean?"

"He was killed by Cossacks from our village."

"What did they do that for?" Davidov asked with interest, lighting a cigarette.

"Give me a cigarette, too, bless you."

"But you don't smoke, Uncle Ivan."

"Not really, but I have a fling sometimes. And now that I recall this old story, my mouth feels kind of dry and salty. . . . What did they kill him for, you ask? Well, he must have deserved it. . . ."

"But why?"

"Because of a woman, his mistress. She was married. Well, and her husband found them out. He was afraid to tackle my father man to man; father was not very big, but he was terribly strong. So the husband got two of his brothers to help him. It happened during Shrovetide. The three of them lay in wait by the frozen river. . . . Merciful God, how they beat him! With clubs and an iron bar. . . . When he was carried home in the morning, he was still unconscious and black as iron all over. He had lain unconscious all night on the ice. Pretty bad for him that, eh? On the ice. In a week he started to speak and understand what was said to him. To cut a long story short, he came to himself, but he didn't get up for two months; he spat blood and talked very, very quiet. All his inside was knocked to bits. His friends came to see him and kept asking: 'Who did it, Fyodor? Tell us and we'll. . . .' But he'd keep quiet and just smile a bit and look around, and when mother went out of the room, he'd whisper: 'I don't remember, friends. I've wronged a good many husbands.'

"How many times did mother kneel down before him and beg him: 'Fyodor, my dearest, at least tell me who tried to kill you. Tell me, for Christ's sake, so that I'll know whose ruin to pray for.' But father would put his hand on her head and stroke her hair like a child's and say: 'I don't know who it was. It was too dark. They knocked me down from behind and I didn't get a chance to see who was pitching into me on the ice. . . .' Or he would give her that same quiet smile and say: 'Why should we remember old wrongs, my sweet? I'll answer for my own sins. . . .' They called in the priest to

hear his confession, and he didn't tell the priest anything either. A terrible firm man he was!"

"How do you know what he said to the priest?"

"Because I was lying under the bed, listening. Mother made me do it.' Get under the bed, Ivan,' she said, 'Perhaps he'll tell the priest who his murderers were.' But father didn't say a word about them. About five times he said in answer to the priest's questions: 'Guilty, Father,' and then he asked: 'Father Dmitri, are there horses in the other world?' The priest seemed to get frightened at that and kept saying: 'What are you talking about, Fyodor, slave of God! How can there be any horses there! You must think about the salvation of your soul!' He went on telling father off and arguing with him for a long time, and father just kept quiet, then he said: 'So there're no horses there, you say? What a pity! I might have got a job as a herdsman. . . . But if there aren't any, there'll be nothing for me to do in the other world. So I'm not going to die and that's all there is to it!' After that the priest gave him the sacrament in rather a hurry and went away very displeased, very much put out he was. So I told mother all I'd heard, and she burst into tears and said: 'He's lived a sinner and he'll die a sinner, will our father.'

"It was spring and the snow had melted when father got up. For two days he walked about round the cottage, and on the third, what should I see—he's putting on his riding coat and hat. 'Go and saddle up the filly, Vanya,' he says to me. By that time all we had left in the stable was one three-year-old filly. Mother heard what he said and she was in tears: 'What good are you for riding now, Fyodor! You can hardly stand on your feet as it is. If you won't pity yourself, at least have pity on me and the children!' But he just laughed and said. 'I've never ridden at walking pace in my life, mother. Just let me sit in the saddle once more before I die, and ride

round the yard at a walk. I'll just go twice round the yard and come straight back indoors.'

"I went and saddled up the filly, and brought her over to the porch. Mother led father out leaning on her arm. He hadn't shaved for two months, and in our dark cottage we hadn't noticed how he had changed.... I looked at him in the sunlight and hot tears welled up in my eyes! Two months before, father had been black as a raven and now he'd grown a beard that was half grey, and his moustache was grey, too, and his hair at the temples was white as snow.... If he hadn't given a kind of tortured smile, maybe I shouldn't have cried, but when I saw that smile I couldn't stop myself.... He took the reins from me and got hold of the mane, but his left arm was broken, and it had only just healed. I wanted to help him, but he wouldn't let me. He was a terrible proud man! He was even ashamed to show how weak he was. Of course, he wanted to fly up into the saddle like a bird, as he used to do, but he didn't manage it.... He got up in the stirrup but his left hand gave way, his fingers lost their grip and he fell flat on his back on the ground.... Mother and I carried him into the house. He'd only been spitting up blood before, but now it spurted out of his mouth like milk out of a cow. Mother didn't leave the wash-tub all day, she couldn't wash off the blood quick enough. We called in the priest. That night he performed the last anointing; but my father was hard as nails! Only on the third day after the priest's blessing he got restless and started tossing about in bed, then he jumped up, looked at mother with bloodshot but twinkling eyes and said: 'They say that after the sacrament you mustn't step on the earth with bare feet, but I'll stand here a bit. I've travelled this earth a good deal on horseback and on foot and it really makes me sorry to think of leaving

it. . . . Give me your hand, mother, it's done a lot of work. . . .'

"Mother went up and took his hand in hers. He lay back and was quiet for a little, then he said almost in a whisper: 'And I've been to blame for a lot of the tears that hand of yours had to wipe away. . . .' Then he turned his face to the wall and died, went off to the other world to watch over St. Vlas' droves of horses."

Apparently overwhelmed by his memories, Arzhanov lapsed into a long silence. Davidov coughed and asked: "But look here, Uncle Ivan, how do you know your father was killed by the husband of that . . . well, that woman of his, and the brothers? Did you just guess it?"

"Guess it? No, my father told me himself the day before he died."

Davidov even rose a little from his seat.

"How do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. In the morning mother went out to milk the cow. I was sitting at the table learning my lessons before school and I heard father whisper: 'Ivan, come over here.' So I went up to him. Then he whispered: 'Bend down closer to me.' I bent down over him. 'Now, listen to me, son,' he says quietly. 'You're twelve years old now, and when I'm gone, you'll be master here. Remember this: it was Averyan Arkhipov and his two brothers, Afanasi and cross-eyed Sergei, who beat me up. If they'd killed me straight out, I wouldn't be holding anything against them. That's what I asked them to do down there on the river, while I was still conscious. But Averyan said to me: "You won't have an easy death, you dog! You can live for a bit as a cripple and swallow as much of your own blood as you like, then you'll die!" That's why I've got a grudge against Averyan. Death's at my bedside, but I've still got a grudge against him. You're only small now, but when you grow up, remember my sufferings, and kill Averyan! And

don't tell anyone what I've told you, not even your mother, nobody. Swear that you won't tell anyone.' I swore that I wouldn't and with dry eyes kissed the cross my father wore round his neck. . . ."

"Bah, it sounds like a Caucasian revenge in the old days!" Davidov exclaimed, much roused by Arzhanov's story.

"Do you think the Caucasians are the only people who've got hearts? Is the Russian heart made of stone? All people are the same, dear friend."

"Well, what happened then?" Davidov asked impatiently.

"Father was buried. I came back from the cemetery, stood with my back against the wall and drew a line above my head with a pencil. Every month I measured my height and marked it on the wall; I kept wanting to get taller, so that I could strike Averyan. . . . And so I became master of the house, and at that time I was twelve years old, and my mother had seven other children, all younger than me. After father's death mother often got ill, and what a lot of grief and want we had to suffer! Father may have been a daredevil, but for all his fun and games, he knew how to work. To some people he seemed a rotten kind of man, but to us, his family, he was our own father: he fed us and clothed us and for our sakes he bent his back in the fields from spring to autumn. . . . My shoulders were narrow in those days and I hadn't much of a back on me either, but I had to carry the burden of the whole household and work like a grown-up Cossack. When father was alive, four of us used to go to school, but after his death we all had to give it up. I made Nyurka—my ten-year-old sister—milk the cow and cook instead of mother, my younger brothers helped me with the farm work. But I didn't forget to make my mark on the wall every month. I grew slowly that year—grief and poverty

didn't let me grow properly. But I watched Averyan like a young wolf watches a bird from the rushes. I knew every step he took, where he went, where he rode—I knew everything about him. . . .

"The boys of my age used to play all kinds of games on Sundays, but I never had time, I was head of the house. On week-days they would go to school, while I cleaned out the cattle shed. . . . I could have cried with grief for the bitter life I had to live in those days! And bit by bit I began to keep away from the other boys of my age. I got unsociable and silent as a rock. I didn't want to be with people. . . . Then people in the village started talking about me. Ivan Arzhanov, they'd say, he's a bit queer in the head, a bit touched. Curse you, I thought, you ought to be in my skin! Maybe the kind of life I lead would make you cleverer? And I started hating the folk in our village. I couldn't bear the sight of them! Give me another cigarette, friend."

Arzhanov fumbled with the cigarette. His fingers were trembling noticeably. With his eyes closed, pursing his lips funnily and making loud sucking noises, he took a long time to get a light from Davidov's cigarette. -

"And what about Averyan?"

"Well, what about him? He went his own way. Couldn't forgive his wife for my father's love, beat her so badly that she died inside a year. The next autumn he married another, a young girl from our own village. Well, Averyan, I thought, you won't live long with that young wife of yours.

"Without telling mother I started saving up money quietly, and in the autumn, instead of going to the nearest storage bin, I drove my cart of wheat to Kalach and sold it there, then I bought a rifle and ten cartridges from a fellow at the market. On the way back I tried the rifle out and wasted three cartridges. It was a rotten little rifle; the bolt didn't work properly. I had two

misfires out of three, and only the third cartridge went off. When I got home I hid the gun under the roof in the barn and didn't say a word to anyone about it. And then I started watching for a chance to catch Averyan alone. . . . For a long time I didn't have any luck. Either there were too many people about or something else would crop up and stop me from striking him. But in the end I got what I'd been waiting for! The point was I didn't want to kill him in the village, that was the trouble. On the Day of Intercession he went off to the fair at the stanitsa. He went alone, without his wife. I heard he had gone alone and crossed myself, because otherwise I should have had to kill both of them. For two days and a night, while I was lying in wait for him by the roadside, I neither ate nor drank nor had a wink of sleep. I prayed hard in that ditch and begged God to make Averyan come back alone, and not with a company of Cossacks. And merciful God heard the child's prayer! On the evening of the second day I looked up and there was Averyan riding along the road alone. And the number of carts I had watched go by, the number of times I had felt my heart thumping when I thought I spotted Averyan's horses in the distance. . . . He came up level with me and I jumped out of the ditch and said. 'Get down, Uncle Averyan, and pray to God!' He went white as lime-wash and reined in his horses. He was a big, tough Cossack, but what could he do to me? I had a rifle in my hands. 'What's the idea, you little brat?' he shouted. And I said to him: 'Get off and kneel down. You'll find out what the idea is in a minute.' He was a daring devil! He jumped down from the cart and rushed at me with his bare hands. I let him come near—no further away than that clump of grass—and fired point-blank. . . ."

"Suppose you had had a misfire?"

Arzhanov smiled. "Then he'd have sent me to help my father grazing those herds in the other world."

"What happened then?"

"The horses bolted at the sound of the shot, but I couldn't move a step. My legs had gone weak and I was trembling all over like a leaf in the wind. Averyan was lying in front of me but I couldn't even go up to him, I kept raising my foot and putting it down again, I was afraid I'd fall over. I was so shaken up! Well, somehow I collected my wits, went up to him, spat in his face and began going through his pockets. I found his purse. There were twenty-eight ruble notes in it, a gold five-ruble piece, and two or three rubles' worth of change. I counted that up afterwards, at home. The rest of his money he must have spent on presents for his young wife. . . . I threw the empty purse away on the road, then jumped into the ditch—and off I went! It was a long time ago but I remember it all clear as yesterday. I buried the rifle and cartridges in the ditch. When the first snow came I went out at night, dug up my property, brought it back to the village and hid it in an old hollow willow-tree in someone's backyard."

"Why did you take the money?" Davidov snapped fiercely.

"Why not?"

"Why did you take it, I say?"

"I needed it," Arzhanov answered simply. "In those times poverty was gnawing at us worse than a shirtful of lice."

Davidov jumped off the cart and walked for a long time in silence. Arzhanov was also silent. Then Davidov asked: "Is that all?"

"No, that's not all, dear friend. The investigators came down and nosed about everywhere and went away empty-handed. Who'd have thought of suspecting me? And soon afterwards cross-eyed Sergei, Averyan's broth-

er, got a chill chopping timber and died; it got into his lungs. And I began to get very worried. What if Afanasi, too, dies his own death, I thought, and my hand that father blessed to punish his enemies fails to strike? And I got in a real fluster. . . .”

“Wait a minute,” Davidov interrupted him. “Your father only mentioned Averyan, but you seem to have had it in for all three of them.”

“What of it? Father had his own wishes and I had mine. So I was in a fluster. . . . I killed Afanasi through his window when he was having supper. That night I made my last mark on the wall, then wiped them all off with a cloth. And I threw the rifle and the cartridges in the river; I didn’t need them any more. . . . I had carried out my father’s will and my own. Not long afterwards mother took it into her head to die. One night she called me over to her and asked: ‘Was it you who killed them, Ivan?’ ‘Yes, mother,’ I said. She didn’t say anything. Just took my right hand and placed it on her heart. . . .”

Arzhanov flicked the reins, the horses quickened their pace and, looking at Davidov with childishly clear grey eyes, he asked: “Now you won’t keep asking me why I don’t drive horses fast, will you?”

“No, I shan’t,” Davidov replied. “You ought to be a water-carrier with a bullock-cart, Uncle Ivan, and that’s a fact.”

“The number of times I’ve asked Yakov Lukich to make me that, but he won’t have it. He wants to have his laugh on me till the last. . . .”

“Why?”

“When I was a boy I worked for him for a year and a half.”

“Did you though?”

“Yes, dear friend, I did. Didn’t you know Ostrovnov always used to have people working for him?” Arzhanov

wrinkled his eyes cunningly. "He did, dear friend, he did. . . . About four years ago, when the taxes began to squeeze him, he quietened down. He rolled himself into a ball, like a snake before it strikes. If there had been no collectivisation and taxes had been reduced, Yakov Lukich would have shown his horns, I can tell you! He's a real vicious kulak and you're nursing a snake."

After a prolonged silence Davidov said: "We'll see to that, we'll get to the bottom of Ostrovnov. But say what you like, Uncle Ivan, you're a man with a bit of a kink."

Arzhanov smiled as he stared thoughtfully into the distance. "Well, a kink, you know—how shall I put it. . . . Suppose you've got a cherry-tree with a lot of different branches. I come along and cut one to make a whip-handle—cherry-wood makes a good strong whip-handle. When it was growing, it had all kinds of kinks in it, with its knots and leaves. Beautiful it was in its own way. And now I've whittled it down, here it is. . . ." Arzhanov pulled his whip out from under the seat and showed Davidov the brown gnarled cherry-wood whip-handle. "Here it is! Nothing to look at! And it's the same with a man. Without a kink, he's bare and wretched like this whip here. Take Nagulnov—he's learning some strange language—that's his kink; old man Kramskov has been collecting all kinds of match-boxes for twenty years—that's his kink; you've got yourself mixed up with Lushka Nagulnova—that's your kink; a drunk goes down the street, trips up and rubs his back on the fence—that's another kink. Yes, dear chairman, and if you take a man's kink away from him, he'll be as bare and flat as this whip-handle here."

Arzhanov held the whip out to Davidov and said with the same pensive smile: "Here, hold this in your hand for a bit and think it over, mebbe you'll see things clearer. . . ."

Davidov pushed Arzhanov's hand aside vexedly. "Go to hell! I'll get things clear without that."

They rode the rest of the way to the camp in silence.

CHAPTER SIX

The ploughing team was having its midday break. It was a tight squeeze at the long makeshift table for all the ploughmen and drivers. While they ate they occasionally exchanged spicy masculine jokes and business-like remarks about the quality of the cook's porridge.

"Never enough salt. What a cook!"

"A little less salt won't hurt you, salt it yourself."

"But me and Vaska are both eating out of one bowl; he likes his food plain, I like it salty. How can we share it out in one bowl? Give us some advice, if you're so smart."

"Tomorrow we'll get a bit of wood and divide your bowl in two, and that's all. Not much brains in that head of yours if you couldn't think of a simple thing like that!"

"And you've got about as much brains as your plough ox; not more, I'll warrant."

The joking and arguing at table would have continued for a long time, but at that moment they noticed the cart in the distance, and Prýanishnikov, the keenest-sighted of the ploughmen, shading his eyes with his hand, whistled quietly. "It's him—dopey Ivan Arzhanov, and he's got Davidov with him."

Spoons went down on the table with a clatter and everyone's gaze turned impatiently towards the gully in the distance, where the cart had disappeared for a moment.

"So this is what we've come to! Again he's come out to take us in tow," Agafon Dubtsov said with restrained indignation. "Well, I've had enough! You can stand there

blinking at him, if you like, but I've had enough; I'm too ashamed even to blink at him."

Davidov felt a pleasant thrill when he saw how everyone rose together from the table to greet him. As he strode forward, hands stretched out to greet him and smiles gleamed on the dark sunburnt faces of the men and the lightly tanned faces of the girls and women. These women never got really sunburnt; while they were working they swathed their heads so closely in their white kerchiefs that only narrow slits were left for their eyes. Davidov smiled as he glanced at the familiar faces. These people had got to know him well; they were genuinely glad to see him and welcomed him as one of their own. The thought struck Davidov suddenly and a sharp pang of joy elevated his voice and made it a little hoarse:

"Hullo, you backward toilers! Got anything for your guest to eat?"

"Depends how long he's come for. If it's a long time, we'll find something, if it's half an hour, we'll just see him off with low bows. That's it, isn't it, team-leader?" Pryanishnikov said amid general laughter.

"I think I'll be with you for a long time," Davidov said smiling.

And Dubtsov shouted in his deafening bass: "Quartermaster! Put him down for full rations as from today, and you, cook, ladle him out a good bellyful of porridge!"

Davidov went round the table, shaking hands with everybody. The men gave him their usual firm handshakes, but the women looked up at him shyly and offered their hands with fingers stiffly together. Their own local Cossacks did not pay them much attention of that kind and hardly ever condescended to greet a woman as an equal and shake hands with her.

Dubtsov sat Davidov down next to him and placed a hot heavy hand on his knee.

"We're glad to see you, friend."

"I can see that. Thanks."

"Only don't start cursing us straight away."

"But I don't intend cursing you at all."

"No, you won't manage without that, there'll have to be some of that, and besides, a spot of cursing will do us good. But for the time being keep quiet. Let the people enjoy their grub."

"I can wait," Davidov said with a grin. "We'll have a proper talk, but we won't start it at table, we'll be patient, eh?"

"We must be patient," Dubtsov said emphatically amid general laughter and was the first to pick up his spoon.

Davidov ate in silence, concentrating on his food and not raising his head from the bowl. He scarcely heard the subdued voices of his table companions, but all the time he could feel someone's persistent glance on his face. He finished his porridge with a sigh of relief; for the first time in many weeks he felt really satisfied. Boyishly licking his wooden spoon, he looked up. A girl's grey eyes were gazing steadily at him across the table, and they were so full of unspoken love, expectation, hope, and willing submission that for a moment Davidov felt at a loss. He had met this handsome, well-built seventeen-year-old girl with the big hands before, at village meetings or in the street, and then she had smiled at him shyly and affectionately and there had been confusion in her flushed face, but now her glance held something else, something more mature and serious.

Where did you spring from and what do I need of you, you sweet kid? Davidov thought absently, regarding the girl's violently blushing face. And what do you need of me? You've got so many young fellows running after you, and you look at me, you blind little thing! Why, I'm twice your age; all scarred and ugly, and half my front

teeth are missing; but you can't see it. . . . No, I don't want you, poor little Varya. Grow up without me, my dear.

She dropped her eyes and turned away a little on meeting Davidov's glance. Her lashes fluttered and her big calloused fingers trembled visibly as they toyed with the folds of her shabby blouse. She was so artless and spontaneous, so naïvely incapable of concealing her feelings that no one but a blind man could have failed to notice them.

Kondrat Maidannikov addressed Davidov with a laugh: "Don't look at Varya, man, you're making her blush to the roots of her hair! Go and have a wash, Varya, mebbe it'll cool you off a bit. But how can she? Her legs are giving way under her. . . . She's my driver and she won't give me any peace, she's been asking all the time when you'd arrive, Davidov. But how was I to know? Leave me alone, I told her, but she kept at me with her questions from morning to night, like a woodpecker at a dry log."

As if to disprove the statement that her legs were giving way under her, Varya Kharlamova turned sideways, sprang lightly over the bench on which she had been sitting and walked away to the wagon, glancing round angrily at Maidannikov and whispering something through pale lips. When she reached it, she turned towards the table and shouted in a trembling, high-pitched voice: "You. . . . You're not speaking the truth, Uncle Kondrat!"

She was answered by a roar of laughter.

"Defending herself from a distance," Dubtsov said with a chuckle. "Yes, that's the safest way."

"Why upset the girl? There was no need for that," Davidov said with disapproval.

"You don't know her yet," Maidannikov replied condescendingly. "It's only with you she's so submissive.

When you're not about, for two pins she'd knock the stuffing out of any of us. She bites, she does! A real terror! Did you see her spring up just now? Like a mountain goat!"

No, Davidov's male vanity was not flattered by this simple girlish love, of which the whole ploughing team had long been aware and which he himself had only just perceived. Had it been another pair of eyes that gazed at him with such selfless devotion and love, it would have been a different matter.... In an effort to bring this awkward conversation to a close, Davidov said jokingly: "Thank you, cook, and thank you, wooden spoon! You've fed me well!"

"Thank your right hand and big mouth for their trouble, chairman, not the cook and the spoon. Perhaps you'd like another helping?" the cook, an amazingly stout and majestic woman, enquired, rising from the table.

Davidov surveyed her ample curves, strapping shoulders and enormous girth with unconcealed astonishment.

"Where did you get this one from?" he whispered to Dubtsov.

"Made to order for us at the Taganrog Iron and Steel Works," the quartermaster, an easy-going young fellow, answered for him.

"How is it I never saw you before?" Davidov asked, still amazed. "How did I manage to miss an outsize like you, mother?"

"Mother indeed!" the cook snorted. "How can I be 'mother' to you, when I'm only forty-seven? And you haven't seen me before, because in winter I never go out of the house. With a figure like mine and such short legs, I'm no good at walking in the snow. I'd get stuck before I'd gone two paces. I stay at home all winter and weave wool and knit shawls for a living. I'm not much good in the mud either. I'm like a camel—afraid of my

feet slipping. But when it's dry, I come out as a cook. And I'm no 'mother' of yours, comrade chairman! If you want to get on with me and never go hungry, then call me Darya Kupriyanovna."

"I'll be only too glad to get on with you, Darya Kupriyanovna," Davidov said smiling, and rising to his feet, bowed with the utmost seriousness.

"Well, that'll be better for you and for me, and now give me your mug and I'll pour you out some good sour milk to finish up with," the cook replied, vastly pleased at Davidov's politeness. With a generous hand she poured out a full mug of the sourest, creamiest milk and served it to Davidov with a low bow.

"But why do you work as a cook instead of taking part in the farm work?" Davidov asked. "With your weight you'd only need to lean on the plough handles and the share would sink half a metre into the soil straight away, and that's a fact."

"I've got a bad heart! The doctors told me I've got fatty degeneration of the heart's activities. It's bad enough being a cook; even when I lift a few pots and pans about, my heart's in my throat. No, Comrade Davidov, I'm no good for ploughing. That's no job for me."

"Always complaining of her heart and she's already buried three husbands. Outlived three Cossacks, she has, and now she's looking for a fourth, but somehow there don't seem to be many takers; they're afraid of getting crushed to death with a partner like her!" said Dubtsov.

"You pock-marked liar!" the cook burst out, very much annoyed. "Is it my fault if none of my three Cossacks turned out to have any guts in them; they were seedy weaklings, that's all they were! Am I to blame if God didn't let them live?"

"But you helped them die," Dubtsov persisted.

"How?"

"You know how. . . ."

"Talk sense, man!"

"I'm talking sense as it is. . . ."

"No, you'd better make yourself plain, don't wag your tongue for nothing!"

"Everyone knows how you helped them—with your love," Dubtsov said cautiously, chuckling to himself.

"You blithering idiot!" the cook yelled above the general roar of laughter and swept up an armful of crockery from the table.

But it was not so easy to knock the imperturbable Dubtsov out of his saddle. He calmly drank the rest of his milk, wiped his moustache with his hand and said: "I may be an idiot, of course, and I may be blithering, but in such matters, my girl, I know what I'm talking about."

At that the cook let fly at Dubtsov with such an epithet that the table rocked with mirth and Davidov, purple with laughter and embarrassment, scarcely managed to say: "What's going on, lads! I never heard the like of that even in the Navy!"

Dubtsov, however, maintaining an air of complete seriousness, shouted with mock indignation: "I'll take an oath on it! I'll kiss the holy cross! But what I say is true, Darya: it was your love sent all three of 'em to the other world! Three husbands—takes some thinking about, doesn't it! . . . And what did Volodya Grachov die of last year? He used to come and see you, too. . . ."

Before Dubtsov could finish the phrase he was obliged to duck hurriedly. A heavy wooden ladle whistled over his head like a shell splinter. With youthful agility he swung his leg over the bench. Ten paces from the table he suddenly swerved aside as a metal bowl, splashing sour milk on all sides, whined past him and, describing a broad curve, fell to earth far out in the steppe. Planting his feet wide apart, he shook his fist and shouted: "Careful, Darya! Throw what you like, but not the clay

bowls! I'll take it out of your earnings for broken crockery, that I will! Get behind the wagon, like Varya, you'll find it easier to make your excuses from there! But what I say is true: you put your husbands in the grave and now you're venting your rage on me. . . ."

Davidov had difficulty in restoring order. Not far from the wagon they sat down for a smoke and Kondrat Maidannikov, stuttering with laughter, said: "Every day, either at dinner or supper, there's a show like that. Darya gave Agafon a punch that made his eye black for a week, but he still won't stop pulling her leg. You won't go home from the ploughing without an accident, Agafon. Either she'll pluck one of your eyes out or she'll twist your leg back to front. You'll joke with her once too often."

"She's a Fordson tractor, not a woman!" Dubtsov said with admiration and, pretending not to notice the cook in the offing, went on louder: "No, lads, why should I make a secret of it? I'd marry Darya today if I wasn't married already. But only for a week, mind you, then I'd run for it. I couldn't last out more than a week, strong as I am. And I don't feel like dying just yet. What's the pleasure in condemning yourself to death? After lasting out the whole of the Civil War, go and die through a woman? . . . No, I may be a blithering idiot, but I'm terrible crafty! I'd manage a week somehow with Darya, but after that I'd creep out of bed in the middle of the night, crawl on my belly to the door, then I'd be out into the yard and off back home like a shot from a gun. . . . God's truth, Davidov, I wouldn't tell a lie, and Pryanishnikov here wouldn't let me. Him and me, we wanted to thank Darya for her good cooking and give her a cuddle; so he went round the front and I went round the back and we tried to join hands but we couldn't get our arms round her—she's a bit too broad! We called out to the quartermaster, but he's only a youngster and a bit shy,

he was afraid to come close to Darya. So she'll remain for ever now never properly embraced."

"Don't believe the boulder, Comrade Davidov!" the cook said, now laughing good-humouredly. "If he doesn't tell a whopper today, he'll be eating his heart out tomorrow. Every step he takes he tells a lie, he can't help it, he was born like it!"

After they had rested and smoked, Davidov asked: "How much is there left to plough?"

"A hell of a lot," Dubtsov answered unwillingly. "More than a hundred and fifty hectares. Yesterday it was a hundred and fifty-eight."

"Excellent work, I must say!" Davidov said coldly. "What have you been doing out here? Staging these shows with the cook?"

"Now, you needn't put it like that."

"The second and third teams finished their ploughing long ago. Why haven't you?"

"Well, let's get everybody together this evening, Davidov, and have a heart-to-heart talk, but now we'll go and plough," Dubtsov suggested.

It was a sensible suggestion and, after thinking for a moment, Davidov agreed.

"What oxen will you give me?"

"Use mine," Kondrat advised. "They're fine animals and they've got into the run of things, but the two pairs of youngsters we've got are on holiday."

"How do you mean—on holiday?" Davidov asked in surprise.

"They're weak," Dubtsov explained smiling. "They kept stopping and lying down in the furrow, so we unharnessed them and let them out to pasture over by the pond. There's some good grass there, fine rich stuff; let 'em fatten up for a bit, they're no good as they are anyhow. They were very thin after the winter, and now, what with working every day, they've gone right off; they

can't pull a plough and that's all there is to it! We tried paring them up with old-timers, but it didn't do any good. You plough with Kondrat's, he's giving you good advice."

"And what will he do himself?"

"I'm letting him off home for two days. His wife's ill in bed, she didn't even send him out any clean shirts, just said he was to come home."

"Oh well, that's different. I was thinking you wanted to send him on holiday as well. You seem to be in a holiday mood here, as far as I can see. . . ."

Dubtsov winked at the others and they all got up and went to harness the oxen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

At sunset Davidov unharnessed his oxen at the end of the strip and let them graze. He sat down on the grass at the edge of a furrow, wiped the sweat from his forehead on the sleeve of his jacket, and with trembling fingers started to roll a cigarette; only then did he feel how utterly exhausted he was. His back ached, little tremors were running up behind his knees, and his hands shook like an old man's.

"Shall we be able to find our oxen in the morning?" he asked Varya.

She was standing in front of him on the ploughed land. Her small feet in their big worn-out shoes were almost hidden in the loose soil of the freshly ploughed furrow. Pulling her dust-grey kerchief from her face, she said: "We'll find them, they never go far at night."

Davidov closed his eyes and smoked avidly. He did not want to look at the girl. But she, her face shining with a tired but happy smile, said quietly: "You've worn me out, and the oxen, too. You take mighty few rests."

"I've worn myself to a frazzle, too," he said sombrely. "You ought to rest more often. Uncle Kondrat seems to rest a lot, he gives the oxen plenty of breathers and always ploughs more than anyone else. But you're tired because you're not used to it."

She had been about to add "dear", but in sudden alarm closed her lips tight.

"You're right there, I haven't got into the way of it yet," he agreed.

He rose with difficulty and tramped back along the furrow to the camp. Varya followed behind for a little, then came up and walked beside him. In his left hand he carried a torn and faded sailor's vest. That afternoon, while adjusting his plough, he had bent down and caught the collar band on one of the handles; straightening up suddenly, he had torn the vest right down the front. The day was warm enough and he could have managed perfectly well without it, but it was quite impossible for him to work stripped to the waist in the presence of a girl. Worriedly holding the edges of his torn vest together, he asked if she had a pin of any sort. She replied that unfortunately she had none. He gazed despondently in the direction of the camp. It was more than two kilometres away. But I'll have to go, he thought, and with a grunt of annoyance and muttering curses under his breath, he said: "Listen, Varya, you wait for me here, I'm going back to the camp."

"What for?"

"I'll get rid of this rag and put on my jacket."

"You'll be too hot in a jacket."

"All the same I think I'll go," he said stubbornly.

Damn it all, he just couldn't go prancing about with no shirt on in front of her! How could he let this sweet innocent girl see what was depicted on his chest and stomach. To be sure, the tattooing on the two hemispheres of his broad chest was quite modest and even a

little sentimental: the hand of the ship's artist had skilfully depicted two doves; when Davidov moved, the doves also moved, and when he hunched his shoulders, the doves touched beaks, as if they were kissing. That was all. But on his stomach. . . . That piece of work had been a cause of prolonged moral suffering to Davidov. During the Civil War, Davidov, then a young man of twenty, had once got himself disastrously drunk. On the lower deck of the destroyer he had been given another glass of spirits. While he lay unconscious and stripped to the waist in one of the lower bunks, two drunken friends from a neighbouring minesweeper—masters of the art of tattooing—had set to work on him, exerting their drunken imaginations to the height of indecency. After that he stopped going to the public bath-house, and at medical inspections insisted on having only male doctors examining him.

When he was demobilised, during the first year of his work at the factory, he somehow screwed up his courage sufficiently to go to the bath-house. Covering his belly with his hands, he found himself a wooden tub and began soaping his head liberally. Almost at once he heard a faint chuckle somewhere below him. He rinsed his face and opened his eyes: an elderly bald-headed man was leaning over the bench examining with undisguised curiosity the tattooed picture on Davidov's stomach and sniggering delightedly. Davidov unhurriedly poured his water away and thumped the inquisitive fellow's bald head with the heavy oak tub. Without finishing his examination of the picture, the fellow closed his eyes and collapsed quietly, on the floor. Still without hurrying, Davidov washed himself, poured a basinful of icy water over the bald-headed bather and, when the latter opened his eyes, marched off into the dressing room. Since then Davidov had quite given up the pleasure of steaming himself properly, according to true

Russian custom, in a bath-house, and preferred always to bathe at home.

At the mere thought that Varya might catch even a glimpse of his decorated stomach, he felt hot all over, and with a shudder he drew the remnants of his tattered vest closer round him.

"Unharness the oxen and let them graze for a bit, I'm off," he said with a sigh.

He did not relish the prospect of going round the ploughed land or of stumbling for about three kilometres over the furrows. And all because of a stupid accident.

But Varya interpreted his feelings in her own way. My darling's shy of working beside me without a shirt, she decided and, grateful to him for wishing to spare her maiden modesty, determinedly kicked off her shoes.

"I can get there quicker than you."

Before Davidov had a chance to say a word, she was flying like a bird towards the camp. Her dusky legs flashed across the dark ploughland and the ends of her white kerchief fluttered behind her in the wind. She ran leaning slightly forward, pressing her clenched fists to her firm young breasts, and she had only one thought: I'll run and get his jacket. . . . I'll get it quickly and please him, and then perhaps he'll look at me nicely for once and even say: "Thanks, Varya!"

He watched her for a long time, then unharnessed the oxen and walked off the ploughland. Soon he found some bindweed twisting over the dead grass of the previous year. He stripped the pliant stem of leaves and laced up his torn vest, then lay down on his back and at once fell asleep, as if he had dropped into something black and soft and smelling of earth. . . .

He woke up because something—was it a spider or a caterpillar?—was crawling over his forehead. Frowning, he passed his hand over his face and again fell into

a doze. And again something slithered and crawled over his upper lip and started tickling his nose. He sneezed and opened his eyes. Varya was crouching in front of him, shaking with barely suppressed laughter. She had been trailing a stem of dry grass over Davidov's face and had not had time to jerk her hand away when he opened his eyes. He seized her slender wrist, but she did not try to break free; she merely sank down on one knee and her laughing face at once became anxiously expectant and submissive.

"I've brought you your jacket. Get up," she whispered scarcely audibly, making a feeble attempt to release her wrist.

He loosened his fingers. Her hand, big and sunburnt, fell on her knee. Closing her eyes, she listened to the swift vibrant beating of her heart. She was still waiting, still hoping for something. . . . But Davidov was silent. His chest rose and fell calmly, not a single muscle quivered in his face. Then he sat up and, settling himself comfortably with his right leg under him, put his hand lazily into his pocket and felt for his pouch. Now their heads were almost touching. His nostrils twitched as he caught the fragrant odour of her hair. Her whole body smelled of the midday sun, the sultry grasses, and that singularly fresh and bewitching aroma of youth that no one has ever yet been able to describe in words.

What a sweet kid! he thought, and sighed. They rose to their feet almost simultaneously, looked into each other's eyes for a few seconds in silence, then he took his jacket from her hands and smiled affectionately only with his eyes.

"Thanks, Varya!"

Yes, he had thanked her. What she had hoped for when she ran for the jacket had come true. Then why the tears in her grey eyes, and why, as she tried to hold them back, did her thick black lashes flutter so

quickly? What are you crying for, dear? She wept soundlessly, with a kind of childlike helplessness, her head held low. But Davidov noticed nothing; he was carefully trying to roll himself a cigarette without wasting a single grain of tobacco. He had no cigarettes left, his tobacco was running out and he was saving it, making neat little cigarettes that were good for only five or six pulls.

She stood for a little, vainly trying to calm herself, then turned sharply and walked away.

"I'll fetch the oxen," she said.

But even then Davidov did not hear the poignant emotion in her trembling voice. He nodded and lighted his cigarette, thinking hard how many days it would take the team to plough the whole strip of spring fallow on its own, and whether it might not be better if he were to transfer a few ploughs from the third team, the strongest of all.

It was all right for her to cry now that he could not see her tears. And she cried with relish, and her tears flowed down her olive cheeks, and she wiped them away with the corners of her kerchief as she walked.

Her first pure, virgin love had run up against his indifference. But Davidov had always been rather blind in matters of love and a lot of things never occurred to him, and even if they did, it was always with considerable delay, and sometimes the delay was fatal. . . . As he harnessed up the oxen, he noticed the grey streaks left on Varya's cheeks by the tears that she had just shed and he had not noticed. He spoke with reproach in his voice: "Now then, Varya my girl! It looks as if you haven't washed today."

"Why?"

"Your face is all streaky. You must wash every day," he said in a tone of instruction.

The sun set while they were still tramping wearily back to the camp. The shadows lengthened over the

steppe. Blackthorn Gully was wrapped in mist. The dark-blue, almost black clouds in the west slowly changed colour. At first their lower edge became a dull purple, then a blood-red glow broke through them, mounted rapidly and spanned the sky in a broad orange band. He'll never love me, Varya thought sadly, compressing her full red lips.

It'll be windy tomorrow and the oxen will have a hard time with the soil so dry, Davidov thought with displeasure, as he watched the flaming sunset.

All this time Varya had been trying to say something, but some strange force had prevented her. When they were not far from the camp, she at last found the courage.

"Give me your vest," she begged in a whisper and, afraid that he would refuse, added imploringly: "Please give it to me!"

"What for?" he asked in surprise.

"I'll sew it up, I'll sew it up so neat you won't be able to see the seam. And I'll wash it for you."

He burst out laughing. "But I've sweated it rotten. There's nothing left to put a needle through. No, Varya my girl, this vest has done its time, it's only good for Darya Kupriyanovna to wash the floor of the wagon with."

"Give it to me and let me have a try. Then you'll see what it looks like," the girl insisted.

"Well, I suppose you can have it if you like, but it's a waste of your labour."

She could not very well return to camp with Davidov's striped vest in her hand; it would have caused too much gossip and frivolity at her expense. She glanced surreptitiously at Davidov and, turning away a little, pushed the little warm bundle under her bodice. It was a strange and disturbing feeling that she experienced when his vest touched her bare breast. All the burning heat of

that strong male body seemed to enter it and fill it to overflowing. . . . Her lips grew suddenly dry, beads of perspiration appeared like dew on her narrow white forehead, and even her walk became somehow cautious and uncertain. But he saw nothing and noticed nothing. A minute later he had already forgotten pushing his dirty vest into her hands, and was exclaiming cheerfully: "Look how they honour the victors, Varya! That's the quartermaster waving his cap to us; we've done a good lashing of work today, and that's a fact!"

After supper the men made up a campfire not far from the wagon and seated themselves round it to smoke.

"Well, now let's have it out. Why have you been working badly? Why are you late with the ploughing?" Davidov asked.

"The other teams have got more oxen," Beskhlebnov the younger, responded.

"How many more?"

"Don't you know? The third team's got eight more pairs than us, and that means four more ploughs! The first has got two ploughs more, so they're stronger than us too."

"And our plan's bigger," Pryanishnikov put in.

Davidov laughed shortly. "How much bigger?"

"Mebbe only thirty hectares, but it's bigger. You can't plough that up with your nose, you know."

"Didn't you approve the plan in March? What are you moaning about now? We went according to the amount of land for each team, wasn't that it?"

Dubtsov said steadily: "No one's moaning, Davidov, that's not the point. The oxen in our team finished the winter in a bad state. And we got less hay and straw when the cattle and fodder were made collective property. You know that as well as I do and there's no

cause to find fault with us. Yes, we are behindhand, most of our oxen have turned out to be weak; but the feed ought to have been shared out properly, not like you and Ostrovnov planned it—feed up your stock on what the private households handed in. That's why it's worked out like this, with some people already through with their ploughing and getting the animals ready for mowing, and us, still a bothering with this here fallow."

"Let us help you then," Davidov suggested. "Lyubishkin will give you a hand."

"We won't say no," Dubtsov declared, supported by the silent assent of the others. "We're not an arrogant lot."

"Well, one thing's quite clear," Davidov said thoughtfully. "And that is that the management and all of us made a blunder. In the winter we distributed the fodder on a territorial basis, as you might say. It was a mistake! We arranged our man-power and animal-power wrongly—that was another mistake! But, by hell, we've only ourselves to blame. We made the mistakes, we'll put 'em right. Your output, your daily output isn't bad on paper, but taking it all round, the result's no good at all. Let's consider how many extra ploughs you'll need to get out of this fix you're in. Let's count it up and get it all on paper, and when we start mowing we'll remember our mistakes and distribute our forces better. We can't go on making mistakes like this much longer!"

For about two hours they sat round the fire, arguing, reckoning, and grumbling at each other. Perhaps the most energetic speaker of all was Atamanchukov. He spoke heatedly and made sensible proposals, but Davidov happened to catch his eye while Beskhlebnov was giving Dubtsov the sharp edge of his tongue and noticed in his glance such an icy hatred that he raised his eyebrows in amazement. Atamanchukov averted his glance hastily, fingered the chestnut stubble on his throat, and when a

minute later he looked up and again encountered Davidov's glance, his eyes were glowing with simulated friendliness and every wrinkle in his face was filled with good-natured unconcern. A real actor! thought Davidov. But what made him give me such a vicious look? He must still hold a grudge against me for wanting to turn him out of the collective farm last spring.

Davidov did not know, and could not have known, that the night after Atamanchukov's expulsion had been proposed, Polovtsev had summoned Atamanchukov and, clenching his massive jaws, had ground out between his teeth: "What do you think you're doing, you bungler? I want you to be a model collective farmer, not a trouble-making fool that may ruin himself over nothing and then ruin the rest of us at a GPU interrogation. You get down on your knees at the next general collective-farm meeting, you dog, and make sure that the meeting doesn't confirm your team's decision. Until we start, not a shadow of suspicion must fall on our people."

Atamanchukov had not been obliged to get down on his knees. At Polovtsev's instigation Ostrovnov and all his accomplices had spoken up solidly for him and the meeting had not approved the team's decision. Atamanchukov had got off with a public reprimand. Since then he had kept quiet, worked excellently and had even become an example to slackers of a public-spirited attitude towards labour. But his hatred of Davidov and the collective-farm system he could not hide safely. From time to time it would slip out, now in a carelessly spoken word, now in a sceptical smile, and sometimes it would flare up wildly and at once die down in the steely blackness of his blue eyes.

The amount of help the team needed and the time for the end of ploughing were not finally decided until midnight. While the men were still sitting round the fire, Davidov wrote Razmyotnov a note and Dubtsov volun-

teered to set off at once, before dawn, to the village, so that with Lyubishkin's help he would be able to select the best ploughmen and be back with the oxen from the third team by dinner-time. For a little while longer they smoked in silence round the dying fire, then went to bed.

And at the same hour near the wagon another kind of conversation was taking place. In an old tin basin Varya was carefully washing Davidov's vest. Beside her stood the cook, talking to the girl in her deep mannish voice.

"What are you crying for, you little fool?"

"It smells of salt. . . ."

"What of it? Everyone who works gets his shirt salty and sweaty. Did you think it'd smell of scent? What are you howling for? He hasn't done you any harm, has he?"

"Oh no, auntie!"

"Then what are you snivelling for, you fool?"

"But I'm not washing just anyone's vest, he's my own, my dearest," the girl said, bending her head over the basin and trying to stifle her sobs.

After a prolonged silence the cook planted her hands on her hips and exclaimed vexedly: "Now then, I've had enough of this! Varya, hold your head up at once!"

Poor little ox-driver, only seventeen years old! She raised her head, and the tearful but happy eyes of un-kissed youth looked up at the cook.

"Even the salt on his vest is dear to me. . . ."

Da'rya Kupriyanovna's mighty bosom heaved with laughter.

"Now I see you've become a real girl."

"And what was I before? Wasn't I real?"

"Before! Before you were just a puff of wind, but now you're a real girl. Until a lad knocked down another lad because of the girl he fancies, he's not a real lad, he's only half a one. While a girl just grins and rolls

her eyes, she's not a girl, she's only a puff of wind in a skirt. But when her eyes grow wet with love, when her pillow is never dry of tears at night, then she's a real girl! Understand, stupid?"

Davidov lay in the wagon with his hands behind his head; sleep would not come. I still don't know the people in the collective farm, I don't know what's at the bottom of them, he thought despondently. First it was dispossessing the kulaks, then organising the collective farm, then all the affairs of the farm—I just haven't had time to get to look at people. What sort of leader am I if I don't know people and can't find time to know them properly? I've got to know them all, there's not so very many. And it's not all so simple as it seems. . . . Think what kind of fellow Arzhanov has turned out to be. Everybody considers him a dolt, but he's no dolt, not one little bit! There's no getting to the bottom of him quickly, the bearded old devil; he got into his shell when he was a kid and shut himself in tight. Just try and get at his soul now—some hopes! And Ostrovnov is another combination lock. I've got to size him up thoroughly. It's clear he was once a kulak, but now he's working well. Must be nervous about his past. . . . But we'll have to take him off supply managing, let him work as an ordinary collective farmer. And Atamanchukov's a queer fish. He looks at me like an executioner at a condemned man. I wonder why? He's a typical middle peasant. Of course, he was with the Whites, but which of them wasn't? That's not the answer. I've got to figure everything out properly, I've had enough of working in the dark, not knowing who I can really trust, who I can really rely on. Yes, you're slipping, sailor! If the lads back in the factory knew how you're running this collective farm, they'd skin you alive.

The women drivers were sleeping out in the open, not far from the wagon. As he fell into a doze, Davidov

heard Varya's high voice and Kupriyanovna's deep bari-tone.

"What are you pressing up against me for, like a calf on a cow?" the cook was saying, laughing and gasping for breath. "That's enough cuddling, do you hear, Varya? Move over, for Lord's sake, you're breathing heat like a stove! Did you hear what I said? I wish I'd never let you lie with me. . . . How hot you are. You don't feel ill, do you?"

Varya's laughter was like the cooing of a turtle dove. Smiling sleepily, Davidov imagined them lying together. What a sweet kid, he thought as he dropped off to sleep. She's grown up though, fit to be a bride, but she has the mind of a child. Good luck to you, Varya dear.

He woke up when it was already light. There was no one in the wagon, no sound of men's voices from outside; all the ploughmen were in their furrows, only he was taking it easy in his roomy bunk. He sat up quickly, put on his foot wrappings and boots, then noticed by the head of his bed his vest, washed clean and skilfully sewn up with a neat seam, and his clean canvas shirt. "How did my shirt get here? I came here without anything at all, that's a fact. How did this shirt get here? This is queer!" Davidov muttered in astonishment, and in order to convince himself that it was not a dream, even passed his hand over the cool canvas.

Only when he had pulled on his vest and left the wagon did it dawn on him what happened. Varya, dressed in a smart blue blouse and a carefully ironed black skirt, was washing her feet at the water butt. She looked pink and fresh as the break of day; she was smiling at him with her rosy lips and, just as on the day before, her grey wide-set eyes were glowing with inward joy.

"Worn out after yesterday, chairman? Overslept?" she asked in her laughing high-pitched voice.

"Where did you go last night?"

"To the village."

"When did you get back?"

"Only a little while ago."

"Was it you brought my shirt?"

She nodded mutely and a spark of alarm flickered in her eyes.

"Perhaps I didn't do right? Perhaps I shouldn't have gone into your room? But I thought your striped vest wouldn't last out."

"You're a brick, Varya! Thanks for everything. But what's the occasion for this dressing up? Strike me! Why, she's even got a ring on her finger!"

Confusedly twisting the plain silver ring on her third finger, she stammered: "Everything I had on was so dirty. So I went to see mother and changed my clothes..." and suddenly overcoming her confusion, she flashed a roguish glance at him: "I wanted to put my best shoes on, too, so that you might condescend to look at me once during the day. But you can't drive oxen for long with them on."

Davidov burst out laughing. "Now I shan't take my eyes off you, my fleet-footed little doe! Off you go and harness the oxen, I'll be along in a moment, as soon as I've washed."

That day Davidov scarcely had time to work at all. No sooner had he washed than Kondrat Maidannikov arrived.

"But you were to be gone two days, why are you back so early?" Davidov asked, smiling.

Kondrat made an expressive gesture with his hand. "Felt restless there. My wife's on her feet again, she only had a touch of fever, so what was I needed for? I turned round and back I came. Where's Varya?"

"She's gone to harness the oxen."

"All right then, I'll go and plough and you wait for the guests. Lyubishkin himself is bringing up eight

ploughs. I passed them when I was half-way here, and Agafon is riding in front, on a white mare, just like General Kutuzov. And there's some news too. Yesterday evening, after dusk, someone fired at Nagulnov."

"What?!"

"Just like that, with a rifle. Some bastard or other. Nagulnov was sitting by the open window, with a light on, and someone took a pot at him. The bullet just missed his temple, grazed the skin, that's all. He's got a bit of a twitch, either from shock or rage, but otherwise he's alive and kicking. The district militia have come down and are nosing around, but it's a waste of time. . . ."

"Well, I'll have to say good-bye to you tomorrow. I'm going back to the village," Davidov decided. "The enemy's showing his head, eh, Kondrat?"

"All the better if he is. It's easier to slash a head that's showing," Maidannikov said calmly and began changing his boots.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After midnight gleamlessly thick clouds came striding shoulder to shoulder across the starry sky; a fine autumn drizzle began to fall, and soon it grew very dark, cool and quiet in the steppe, as in a deep, damp cellar.

An hour before dawn, the wind sprang up and the clouds jostled along faster; the rain, which had been falling sheer, took an eastward slant, from the base of the clouds to the very earth, and then stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Before sunrise a horseman rode up to the team's wagon. He dismounted unhurriedly, tied his bridle to a hawthorn bush growing near by, then just as unhurriedly, stretching himself as he walked, went up to the cook, who was busying herself over a little stove dug

into the ground, and uttered a quiet greeting. Darya Kupriyanovna did not answer. She was kneeling forward with her elbows and massive bosom touching the ground and her head on one side, blowing with all her might at the charred splinters in an attempt to kindle a flame. But the wood, damp from the rain and the abundant morning dew, refused to burn, and clouds of smoke and grey flakes of ash blew in the cook's straining purple face.

"Oh, blow and blast this kind of cooking!" the infuriated cook exclaimed, out of breath from coughing and the smoke. She straightened up for a moment to push her hair into place under her kerchief, and it was only then that she noticed the newcomer.

"You ought to put your firewood away for the night in the wagon, cookie! There's not enough wind in your nostrils to make wet wood burn. Now then, let me give you a hand," he said and gently pushed the cook aside.

"There are plenty of know-alls like you roaming the steppe. Try lighting it yourself and we'll see how much wind you've got in your nostrils," the cook said grumpily, but moved aside willingly and devoted herself to an attentive examination of the stranger.

The man was not very tall and nothing much to look at. His shabby jacket, girded tightly at the waist with a soldier's belt, fitted him snugly; his neatly darned and patched khaki breeches and old boots, crusted to the knee with grey mud, had also, it seemed, done veteran service; and quite unexpected in contrast to this dilapidated attire was the dashing smart hat of excellent silver-grey Astrakhan that he wore grimly pulled down over his eyes. But the newcomer's brown face was good-natured, his snub nose had a humorous wrinkle in it when he smiled, and his brown eyes looked out upon the world with a condescending and intelligent smile.

He squatted on his haunches and took out of the inside pocket of his jacket a cigarette-lighter and a large flat bottle with a glass stopper. A minute later the sticks had been generously sprinkled with petrol and were blazing merrily.

"That's how to go about it, cookie!" said the stranger, giving the cook a playful slap on her massive shoulder. "And as for the bottle, well, you can have it as a keepsake. If your kindling gets a bit damp, splash some of this over it and everything will be all right. Here you are, take your present, and as soon as you've cooked your gruel, treat me to some! A good bowlful, nice and thick!"

Darya Kupriyanovna slipped the bottle into her bosom and thanked him with almost syrupy sweetness: "Oh, thank you very much indeed, you good kind man! I'll do all I can to please you. But how did you come to have this bottle with you? You aren't a vet, are you? You don't go in for healing cows?"

"No, I'm no cow doctor," the newcomer answered evasively. "But where are the ploughmen? Still asleep?"

"Some of them have gone down to the pond for the oxen, some are at it already in the far fields."

"Is Davidov here?"

"He's in the wagon. He's sleeping on today, poor dear. Such a worker he is, he tired himself out yesterday. And he went to bed late."

"What kept him up so long?"

"Bothered if I know. He came back late from ploughing, then he had to go and have a look at the winter wheat that was sown in the autumn. He went all the way up to the top of the ravine."

"Going to look at crops in the dark?" the stranger said with a smile, wrinkling his nose and staring keenly into the cook's round glistening face.

"Well, I suppose he got there when it was still light, but he was late back. Bothered if I know why he should have been. Maybe he was listening to the nightingales. The way those birds carry on in our Blackthorn Gully, you can't imagine! They sing and they warble and you can't sleep a wink! They turn your heart inside out, that they do, the wretched things! Sometimes it makes me cry my eyes out to listen to them."

"How so?"

"How so?! Well, you get to remembering your young days and all the different things that happened to you when you were a girl. . . . It don't take much to make a woman cry, my dear."

"Did Davidov go alone to have a look at the wheat?"

"He don't need anyone to lead him yet, thank the Lord, he's not blind. But who are you anyway? What have you come here for?" Darya Kupriyanovna checked herself and pursed her lips severely.

"There's something I want to see Comrade Davidov about," the stranger again answered evasively. "But I'm in no hurry, I can wait till he wakes up. Let the hard worker have a good sleep. And while the wood's burning up, you and I will have a chat about one or two things."

"And when shall I peel the potatoes for such a crowd if I'm to stand here jawing with you?" Darya Kupriyanovna asked.

But the quick-witted stranger found an answer to that, too. He took a penknife out of his pocket and tested the blade on his thumb nail.

"Bring the spuds over here, I'll help you peel them. I'd be ready to help such a charming cook all my life if she'd only smile at me at nights like she's doing now."

Darya Kupriyanovna glowed with pleasure but shook her head in mock despair: "You're a bit too skinny, my poor chap! You're too skinny in the waist for me. I

might give you a smile one of these nights, but you'd never get near enough to see it."

The stranger made himself comfortable on an oak chopping block and screwed up his eyes at the laughing cook.

"I can see in the dark like an eagle owl."

"Your eyes may be sharp enough but you won't see a thing because they'll be full of tears. . . ."

"So that's the kind of woman you are," the stranger chuckled. "Mind you aren't the first one to wash yourself in tears, fatty! I'm kind only in the day-time. At night, I've no mercy on the fat ones like you. And you can beg and weep as much as you like!"

Darya Kupriyanovna snorted but glanced at this redoubtable talker with restrained approval.

"Be careful, my dear, pride goes before a fall."

"We'll find that out in the morning. We'll find out who has the fall, and who's to stay sleeping sweetly in bed. Give me some potatoes, chatter-box. We've wasted enough time."

Carrying a heavy pailful of potatoes Darya Kupriyanovna waddled out from behind the wagon, and, still chuckling to herself, sat down on a low stool facing the stranger. As she watched the thin spirals of peel curling between the stranger's deft brown fingers she said with satisfaction: "You're as sharp with your work as you are with your tongue. I've got a good helper in you."

The stranger worked rapidly with his knife and said nothing for a few minutes. Then he asked: "Well, how about Davidov? Does he suit the Cossacks?"

"He'll do. He's a fine, straightforward chap, something like you. Our folk like the kind that don't put on airs."

"So you say he's straightforward?"

"Very straightforward!"

Throwing her a sharp glance from under his hat he added: "A bit simple, in fact?"

"Do you consider yourself simple?" Darya Kupriyannova asked maliciously.

"I wouldn't say so. . . ."

"Then why make Davidov out a fool? There's a lot of likeness between you."

And again the stranger fell silent, smiling to himself and occasionally shooting a glance at the talkative cook.

The purple band of the sunrise broadened in the clouded east. The wind, night-rested, took wing and carried the lusty song of the nightingales from Blackthorn Gully. And then the stranger wiped the blade of his penknife on his trouser leg and said: "Go and wake up Davidov. He can have his extra sleep in the winter."

Davidov came out of the wagon barefoot. He was sleepy and disgruntled. With a passing glance at the stranger he asked hoarsely: "Message from the district committee? Hand it over."

"I've no message, but I am from the district committee. Put your boots on, Comrade Davidov, we've got to have a talk."

Davidov scratched his big tattooed chest and surveyed the stranger condescendingly.

"I'd got a feeling you were here on the district committee's behalf. . . . Just a minute, comrade!"

He dressed quickly, pulled his boots on his bare feet, splashed water on his face from a bitter-smelling oak barrel, and introduced himself with something of a flourish:

"Chairman of the Stalin Collective Farm, Semyon Davidov."

The stranger stepped up to Davidov and put his arm round his broad back.

"Want to be formal, eh! Well, I'm Ivan Nesterenko,

secretary of the district Party committee. And now we're introduced, let's take a walk and talk things over, comrade chairman. Have you got much more to plough?"

"Quite a bit. . . ."

"So the chairman slipped up somewhere?"

Nesterenko took Davidov's arm and led him gently towards the ploughland. Glancing at him sideways, Davidov said shortly: "I miscalculated." And flaring up suddenly, to his own surprise, he blurted out hotly: "But you've got to understand, comrade secretary, I'm a mere babe at farming. I'm not making excuses, but it wasn't only my mistake. This is a new thing. . . ."

"I know and I understand. Take it easy."

"I'm not the only one who's made a mistake. All the chaps I've been relying on bungled the thing, too. I didn't distribute my forces right. Understand?"

"I understand. And there's nothing very terrible about it. You'll put it right as you go along. Got your reinforcements of men and animals? Good. And as for distributing your forces, getting them evenly allotted among the teams, make a note of that for the future, for the haymaking at any rate, and specially for the grain harvest. You've got to think out everything properly in advance."

"That's a fact!"

"And now let's go and see where you've been ploughing. Where's your strip? I want to see how the Leningrad working class are running things on the lands of the Don. May be I'll have to write to the Party secretary at the Putilov Works and complain that you're not up to scratch, eh?"

"That's for you to judge."

Nesterenko's small but strong hand gripped Davidov's elbow even more firmly. As he glanced sideways at the secretary's frank, straightforward face, Davidov suddenly felt so relieved and at ease that a smile came

involuntarily to his firm lips. It was rather a long time since anyone high up in the Party had spoken to him in such a friendly simple way and with such man-to-man understanding.

"Want to test the quality of my work, Comrade Nesterenko? You mean that seriously?"

"Not for a moment! I just wanted to have a look and find out what the working class is capable of when they're not at the bench or the lathe, but on the land. If you want to know, I'm a born and bred Stavropol farmer, and I'm interested to learn what the Cossacks have taught you. Maybe some Cossack woman has been teaching you how to plough and step over the traces? Mind you don't give way to the harmful influence of the Gremyachy Cossack women! There are some of 'em could teach you a trick or two, even though you're an old salt.... They'll easily lead you off the right path! Or has one of them done so already?"

Nesterenko was speaking in a cheerful, easy-going manner and seemed not to be choosing his words, but Davidov at once sensed what he was hinting at under his banter, and every fibre in his body grew tense. Does he know something about Lushka, or was it just a shot in the dark? he thought not without alarm. But he kept up the bantering tone of the conversation.

"It's the women who start hollering if they get off the path and lose their way. But a man, a real man I mean, keeps quiet and goes on looking for it, and that's a fact!"

"And you're a real man, are you?"

"What did you think, comrade secretary?"

"I think that real men are more to my liking than the kind that holler, and if you, Davidov, ever happen to wander off the path, you needn't make a lot of noise about it, but just come and whisper quietly in my ear. I'll help you somehow to get back on firm ground. Is that a bargain?"

"Thanks for your kindness," Davidov said seriously, but to himself he thought, he's smelled out everything, the sly devil! And to offset the seriousness of his last remark, he added: "What a wonderful kind secretary we've got for a change!"

Nesterenko stopped suddenly, turned to face Davidov, pushed his splendid lambskin hat on to the back of his head and, wrinkling his nose in a smile, said: "I'm kind because I didn't keep to the straight road all the time when I was young. Sometimes you'd keep on straight, just as if you were marching on parade, then you'd make a slip and go wandering off God knows where. And then you'd go on stumbling about in the thickets till some kind person showed a young fool the way. Now do you see where my kindness comes from, sailor? But I'm not kind to all and sundry..."

"A horse has four legs but it can still stumble, so they say," Davidov put in with caution.

But Nesterenko eyed him coldly.

"If a good horse stumbles once or twice, it can be forgiven, but sometimes you get a horse that stumbles at every step. No matter how much you train it, no matter what you do, it just goes out of its way to count the bumps with its nose. Why keep such a good-for-nothing in the stables? Get rid of him!"

Davidov laughed shortly and made no reply. The hint was so plain that no explanation was needed.

They walked slowly across the ploughed land, and just as slowly the sun rose behind them, hidden by a huge violet cloud.

"There's my strip," said Davidov, nodding with deliberate carelessness at a level strip of ploughland stretching away into the distance.

With an imperceptible movement of the head Nesterenko tilted his hat over his eyes and went stumping over the damp furrows. Davidov followed him at a lit-

tle distance and saw the secretary stoop several times as if to pull a stalk of grass out of the top of his boot. He was measuring the depth of the furrows. That was too much for Davidov.

"Do your measuring without pretending! Why play a diplomatic game with me like this!"

"You could have pretended not to notice," Nesterenko grunted.

At the other side of the strip he halted and spoke with wounding condescension:

"Well, it's not bad. But the ploughing's uneven, as if it had been done by a kid. Some places it's deep, some places it's a bit shallow, and some places it's much too deep. Most likely, of course, it's lack of skill, but maybe it was because the ploughman was in the wrong mood when he tackled the job. Just remember this, Davidov, that the only place for the angry man is at war, anger helps you to fight there. But when you're ploughing, you've got to have a kind heart, because the earth likes to be treated gently. That's what my dad used to tell me. . . . Well, what are you thinking about, you dryland sailor?!" he shouted suddenly and gave Davidov a violent push with his shoulder.

Davidov staggered, not realising at first that he was being challenged to a wrestle. But when the laughing Nesterenko barged him a second time, Davidov planted his feet wide apart and leaned forward.

They closed trying to grip each other's belts.

"How shall we do it, with belts or without?" Nesterenko asked straining.

"Any way you like, but no tripping."

"And no head throws," Nesterenko gasped, grunting with the effort to shift his opponent.

Davidov put his arms round Nesterenko's taut muscular body and at once realised by his stance that he was confronted with an experienced wrestler. Davidov

was perhaps the stronger of the two, but Nesterenko had the advantage of him in speed and agility. Once or twice, when their faces came close together, Davidov saw his flushed brown cheek and mischievously twinkling eye, and heard his muffled whisper: "Come on then, working class! What are you standing still for?"

For about eight minutes they rocked to and fro on the ploughland, and then Davidov, feeling his strength ebbing, said hoarsely: "Let's get on the grass, this mud'll be the death of us. . . ."

"We stay here till we're finished," Nesterenko muttered, breathing heavily.

Davidov mustered his last strength and managed to force his opponent on to firm ground. And there the bout ended. They both fell together, but before they reached the ground, Davidov managed to get Nesterenko underneath him. Spreading his legs apart and crushing his opponent to the ground with all his weight, he panted: "Well, how about it, secretary?"

"I give in. . . . You're strong all right, working class. . . . It's not so easy to beat me, I've been playing this game since I was a kid."

Davidov scrambled to his feet and graciously offered the loser a hand, but Nesterenko jumped up like a released spring and turned his back.

"Brush off the dirt!"

With all his manly warmth and affection Davidov carefully cleaned the clotted mud and stalks of grass off Nesterenko's back with his big hands. Then their eyes met again and they both laughed.

"You might at least have given in out of respect for my rank in the Party! What difference did it make to you? You Leningrad bear! You've got no politeness in you, no respect for superiors. . . . But look at that smile of his. Smiling from ear to ear and as pleased as a young bridegroom!"

Davidov was indeed smiling broadly.

"I'll remember next time, and that's a fact! But you mustn't fight so hard. We were up to our knees in mud and you wouldn't give in, Nesterenko! You perishing Stavropol middle peasant and small property-owner, as Makar Nagulnov would say. As a Party secretary, you ought to realise that the working class is bound to come out on top in everything, it's been proved historically, and that's a fact!"

Nesterenko whistled derisively and shook his head. His Astrakhan hat slipped on to the back of his head and stayed there miraculously.

"Next time I'll make a point of winning," he said with a chuckle. "Then we'll see what kind of Marxist argument you produce for that! But the trouble is the cook saw us tumbling about like kids, what will she think of us? She'll think we're crazy!"

Davidov shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll say it's because we're young, she'll understand and let us off. . . . But what about that talk, Comrade Nesterenko? Time flies, you know!"

"Find a dry spot where we can sit down."

They seated themselves on a small clayey mound that had once been a marmot's burrow, and Nesterenko began unhurriedly.

"Before coming here I went to Gremyachy. I met Razmyotnov and all the other active Party men in the village. I know Nagulnov already, he's been to the district committee. I've said this to him and to Razmyotnov, and I repeat it to you. You're making a bad job of drawing good collective farmers who're devoted to our cause into the Party. A very bad job! And there are some good lads in the farm, aren't there?"

"That's a fact!"

"What's the hitch then?"

"Even the good ones are biding their time."

"What for?"

"To see how the collective-farm idea works out. For the time being they're keeping themselves to themselves."

"You've got to stir them up, shake them out of their apathy!"

"We do a bit, but there's not much to show. I think our group will increase in the autumn, and that's a fact!"

"And till autumn comes you're just going to sit and wait?"

"No, why should we? We'll act, but we're not going to use pressure."

"I'm not talking about pressure. The thing is you mustn't miss a single chance of winning over any of the hard workers by explaining the Party's policy to him in a way he understands."

"That's what we are doing, Comrade Nesterenko," Davidov assured him.

"But the group doesn't increase. That looks more like inaction than action. Well, we'll see what progress you make in the future. Now let's talk about something else. I want to point out to you a few shortcomings of a different kind. I came here to get to know you, to have a look round, as they say, and to talk things over. You know what we stand for and you can't seriously excuse yourself on the grounds of youth. Your youth is over, and it's so far away now you'll never catch up with it and bring it back. And don't expect me to make any allowance for your proletarian origin, your lack of experience, and so on. But there won't be any of that rigid severity either that some of our Party leaders like to flash around." Nesterenko grew more animated as he went on: "Some very incompetent ways of doing things have taken root in our Party life and we've got fitting expressions for them. We talk about 'taking shavings'

off a man, 'sandpapering' him, and 'scouring' him, as if we were talking about a chunk of rusty iron instead of a human being. Is that right, I ask you? And the people who use these expressions most, mind you, are people who've never taken a shaving off metal or wood in their lives, and probably never had an emery wheel in their hands either. People are very sensitive, and you've got to be terribly careful how you treat them!

"I'll tell you a story. Back in 1918, the order and the discipline in the detachment I was in was just about as bad as it could be. It wasn't a Red Guard detachment, it was no better than an anarchist band, honestly, it was! And then early in 1919, we got a new commissar, a Donets miner. An elderly chap he was, with a bit of a stoop, and a long drooping moustache, like Taras Shevchenko. As soon as he arrived everything went differently. At that time the detachment was being made into a regiment of the Red Army. They were still the same men in the detachment but they began to change. They seemed to have been reborn. And all without a single disciplinary measure, not to mention putting on trial before a Revolutionary Tribunal. And that was only a month after our miner commissar came to the unit! How did he manage it? He did it with his big heart, the cunning devil! He'd talk to every Red Army man, and he had a kind word for them all. If one of them got the wind up before a battle, he'd talk to him quietly and cheer him up. And he knew how to put the reckless ones in their place so that they wouldn't even think of making a fuss or getting their backs up. He'd just whisper to one of them: 'Don't stick your neck out, you fool, you'll get killed, then what shall we do? Without you the whole platoon and maybe the whole company won't be worth a sniff of tobacco.' Well, of course, the young hero would like having himself talked about like that by the commissar,

and he'd stop taking unnecessary risks and fight with his head. . . . But our commissar had one weakness. When we took a big village or a Cossack stanitsa, he'd start kicking over the traces. . . ."

Davidov gave such a start of surprise that he nearly went rolling down the steep side of the wind-carved mound. Digging the fingers of his right hand into the damp clay to stop himself slipping, he exclaimed: "What do you mean, 'kicking over the traces'? What are you blathering about?!"

Nesterenko laughed quietly.

"Not quite the right word! Not kicking over the traces exactly, but browsing in the libraries of rich merchants and landowners, anyone, in fact, who in those days might have had some books. He'd choose the books he needed and confiscate them without any argument. You wouldn't believe it, but he had four cartloads of books with him, a whole library on wheels. And he took as much care of those books as he did of the ammunition. Every cart had a tarpaulin over it, and the books were stacked neatly, cover to cover, and they even had a layer of straw under them. And when we stopped for the night or to take a rest, or when we weren't fighting, at every spare moment, after we'd cleaned our weapons and had some grub, he'd push books at the men and order them to read. And then he'd check up on what you'd read. . . .

"In those days, being young, I was keen on the girls, and I must admit I tried to get out of reading. . . . I could hardly read or write and I was as daft as they come. And one day he caught me out for not reading a book he had given me. I can still remember the author and the title of that book. . . . About two days later he started asking me what it was about, and I was flummoxed. And he said to me—he always used to take care there were no witnesses in such cases, so as not to

make an exhibition of a man—he said to me: ‘Do you mean to go on living all your life like Ivanushka the Fool? I saw you yesterday evening dilly-dallying round one of those girls. Well, get this into your thick head and keep it there. No intelligent girl will want anything to do with an illiterate fool like you, she’d be bored stiff in five minutes. And if the girl’s a fool, there’s no point in it either, she won’t learn any wisdom from you because you haven’t got any yourself, you haven’t lived long enough. And as for all the other male virtues, the literate have as much of them as the illiterate, so, taking all things into consideration, the literate man comes off best. Do you understand that, you young block-head?’

“What answer could I give him? For a fortnight he nagged at me and made fun of me, nearly drove me to tears, but he made me read, and afterwards I got so keen on books you couldn’t drag me away from them. I feel grateful to him till this day and, to be quite honest, I still don’t know who I owe most to for my knowledge and education—my father or my commissar.”

Nesterenko paused thoughtfully, and looked rather sad for a moment. But the next minute, scarcely able to restrain a rather sly smile, he started firing questions at Davidov.

“Do you read anything in your spare time? Probably just glance through the newspapers? And you have so little spare time anyway, eh? By the way, are there any interesting books in your village library?... You don’t know?! Well, that is something you ought to be ashamed of, man! Have you ever been inside the place?... Only twice? That won’t do at all, old chap! I had a better opinion of you, a representative of the Leningrad working class! That’s something I can write to your factory about! But don’t worry, this is what I’ll write: ‘Twenty-five Thousander Davidov, a former worker at

your factory, and now chairman of the Stalin Collective Farm, and the collective farmers under his management, are urgently in need of books. What they most need are popular literature on political and economic subjects, books on field cultivation, stockbreeding, and farming in general. A selection of fiction, classical and modern, would also be desirable. Please help by sending us as a gift a small library of, say, three hundred books, to such and such an address.' Well? Shall I write it? You don't want me to? Quite right, too. Do the job yourself. Out of collective-farm funds buy a library of not less than two or three hundred books. No money, you say? Rubbish! You can get the money somewhere! Sell a pair of old bullocks—it won't ruin you!—and there's your library! And what a library! I counted up yesterday in the office and discovered you've got a clear surplus of draught animals. Why waste fodder on them? Sell them off! Do you know how many of your bullocks are over ten years old?... You don't? Well, that's a pity, but I can help you. You've got nine pairs of old timers that are ten years old or over. A good farmer never keeps useless animals like that in his sheds; he feeds them up and sells them. Understand?"

"I understand all right, but we have decided to sell off all the cattle that's no use in the autumn, including the old bullocks. That was the advice I got from experienced farmers."

"And is that cattle being fed up now?"

"No. At least, the old bullocks are working, I know that for sure."

"Who was this experienced farmer who advised you to sell in the autumn?"

"Our supply manager Ostrovnov and someone else, I can't remember his name."

"Humph, that's interesting. . . . Your manager was as good as a kulak before collectivisation. He must be an

efficient farmer, how could he give you such rotten advice? Sell bullocks in autumn and keep them in the yoke until you do? You'll just be selling a lot of skin and bones. My advice would be different. Put all the cattle you intend selling out to graze now, then feed them up on cattle cake and sell them in summer, when there are not many cattle on the market and meat is dearer. In the autumn there'll be loads of meat going without your cattle, and the price will be lower. You have surplus grain, I know it. Then what are you waiting for? Anyhow it's up to you, I don't intend interfering in your affairs. But think it over anyway.... At any rate you can feed up a couple of old bullocks and sell them right away. After all, you're not going to spend the money on booze, it's for bocks! In short, see that you've got a library in two months. That's point one! Move your reading-room from that tumbledown old hut to one of the good kulak houses—you won't be mistaken if you take the best. That's point two! I'll send you a librarian, a bright lad, and tell him to hold good loud readings every evening. That's point three!"

"Wait a minute with your points!" Davidov implored, red with confusion. "I promise you there'll be a library. Do away with point one! I'll move the reading-room to a good house tomorrow. That's done with point two! But point three is a bit tricky.... I've got a librarian in view, he's a fine lad and a good agitator! But he works at a factory, that's the difficulty.... Anyhow I think the district committee of the Komsomol will help us with that and I'll manage to get him."

Nesterenko heard him out attentively, nodding enigmatically and laughing only with his eyes.

"I like to see a commander go about things energetically and take the right decision. But listen to what I have to say about your reading-room. I was there yesterday and it wasn't a pleasant visit, I can tell you!

Sheer desolation! Dust all over the window-sills. The floors not washed for donkey's years. Everything stinking of mildew and the devil knows what. Like a tomb it was, really! And worst of all, there were only two or three books all told, and they were old ones. On one of the shelves I found a rolled up poster yellow with age. I took it down and had a look at the pictures. And this is what I read:

*"Our ranks delight the lassie's eye,
Old toothless dames in wonder sigh,
And fathers' faces shine:
'Go it, lads! You're doing fine!
Smash the foe until he yields!'
Know, ploughman, as you till the fields,
Safe's your labour, safe your soil,
Guarded by all men of toil!"*

"Well, well, I thought, that's an old acquaintance! I read that poster—yes, I can still remember it—back in 1920, when we were fighting Wrangel. Demyan Bedny's words are still all right, but you must agree that in 1930 we ought to have something fresh, something that has to do with our own times, with collectivisation, for instance. . . ."

"You keep your eyes open, and you're a stickler," Davidov, who still had not recovered from his confusion, mumbled with grudging approval.

"It's my job to keep my eyes open and help to put right mistakes in our work, and I do so with all goodwill towards you, Semyon. But this is only the beginning of the tale, the rest is yet to come. . . . Now you're out here, with the team, you've chucked up the farm, and entrusted all its affairs to Razmyotnov. You know that it's hard going for him at a time like this, that he won't be able to cope with everything, don't you? And yet this is what you do!"

"But you were driving a reaper in the Tubyanskoy fields yourself! Or didn't you mean to set an example?"

Nesterenko waved this aside with some annoyance.

"I worked for a few hours at Tubyanskoy to get to know the people, but that's a different thing altogether. You've come out to this team because of the muddle in your private life. See the difference? If you ask me, you are running away from Lushka Nagulnova. . . . Or am I mistaken?"

The blood drained out of Davidov's face. He turned away and ran his fingers aimlessly through the grass. "Go on," he said huskily.

But Nesterenko put his hand gently and affectionately on his shoulder and, pulling him gently, said: "Now don't get offended. Why did you think I measured your furrows? Because I saw that in some places you ploughed deeper than a tractor! You're venting your feelings on the earth, making the bullocks suffer for your bad temper. . . . From what people who know you say, it looks as if your affair with Lushka is nearing its end. Is that true?"

"Looks like it."

"Well, I'm only too glad to hear it. But get done with it soon, Semyon! The people like you, but the trouble is they are sorry for you. Understand, they're actually sorry for you!—because of this stupid affair. When people follow the Russian tradition of being sorry for all kinds of poor wretches, that's in the nature of things. But when they start being sorry for an intelligent chap, who besides everything else is their leader—what could be more terrible and shameful for that man? This idiotic infatuation of yours with a worthless flirt who only a little while ago was your own comrade's wife is ruining everything! How else can you explain the unforgivable blunders in your work and Nagulnov's? You've got yourselves tied up in the devil's

own knot, and if you don't untie it yourselves, the district committee will have to use a knife—mark my words!"

"Maybe I'd better get out of Gremyachy altogether?" Davidov asked hesitantly.

"Don't talk rot!" Nesterenko cut in sharply. "If you've made a mess, you've got to clear it up first, then you can talk about getting out. What I want you to tell me is this—do you know the Komsomol girl Yegorova, who teaches at your village school?"

"I do, I've met her." Davidov's face suddenly broke into a smile as he remembered his first meeting in the winter, when they were dispossessing the kulaks, with a young and extremely shy schoolmistress.

When they introduced themselves, she had held out her cold perspiring little hand with the fingers very straight and close together, and in an agony of blushes that reduced her almost to tears had just managed to squeeze out the words: "Schoolmistress Yegorova, Lyuda." Davidov had suggested to Nagulnov: "Take her in your team. Let the youngster see what the class struggle is like." But Nagulnov had stared down grimly at his long brown hands and replied: "Take her yourself. She's no good to me for work like this. She teaches the juniors. If one of them gets a bad mark, she cries as much as he does. Who accepted a girl like her for the Komsomol! Call her a Komsomol girl? She's soft as butter!"

For the first time Nesterenko knitted his brows and glanced disapprovingly at Davidov: "What are you smiling for, may I ask? What do you find so funny in my question?"

Davidov made a clumsy attempt to explain the cause of his ill-timed amusement. "It's nothing. I just happened to remember a little thing about the girl. She's so very modest. . . ."

"Remembered a little thing, did you! You've picked a fine time to amuse yourself!" Nesterenko exclaimed with unconcealed annoyance. "You'd do better to remember that this modest teacher is the only member of the Komsomol in the whole village! A big village like yours and no Komsomol group. That's not a little thing! Who's responsible for that? Nagulnov in the first place, and you as well, and I for both of you. And you sit there grinning. . . . I don't like that kind of grin, Semyon Davidov! And don't say you've had so many urgent matters to attend to. All the affairs the Party entrusts us with are urgent. How fast we can set about them is a different matter."

Davidov was beginning to grow a little angry, but he restrained himself and said: "You've spent one day in Gremyachy, Comrade Nesterenko, and in that time you managed to find such a lot of blunders in our work, and in my conduct, too. . . . But suppose you'd been here since January? We'd have enough criticisms to listen to for a week, and that's a fact!"

Davidov's last remark restored some of Nesterenko's good humour. He crinkled his eyes slyly and nudged Davidov with his elbow.

"Wouldn't you admit, Semyon, that if I had not just 'been' in Gremyachy, but had worked side by side with you, there might not have been so many blunders?"

"There would have been less, that's a fact, but still there would have been some. You're no Stalin, you'd have made mistakes all right, and that's a fact! I see many of the mistakes I'm making myself, but I can't put them all right and I can't do it at once, that's my trouble! Back in the spring, some of the school children and their schoolmaster, Shpyn by name, went out into the fields to catch susliks. I was walking past and didn't even stop to have a word with them. I didn't find out, and I still haven't found out, how that old schoolmaster

lives or what his interests are. And here's a worse example. He sent me a note last winter asking for a cart to bring him some firewood. Do you think I sent it? I forgot. Other things put the old man out of my mind and out of my heart. I still feel ashamed when I think of it! And you're right about the Komsomol. We've let something very important slip there, and of course, I'm also to blame, and that's a fact."

But it was not so easy to mollify Nesterenko with repentant statements.

"It's all very well for you to admit your mistakes, and it seems you haven't lost all sense of shame either. But all that doesn't make the Komsomol any bigger or get your schoolmaster any firewood either. You've got to act and not just repent, my dear Semyon!" he insisted.

"Everything will be put right, I give you my word of honour! But you must help us with organising the Komsomol group, I mean the district committee must. Send us one or two lads and a girl Komsomol member, for the time being at least. Yegorova, I mean this seriously, is no good as an organiser. She's too scared. How can she manage the young people, let alone a lot like ours!"

Only now was Nesterenko satisfied.

"Now you are talking!" he said. "We'll help you with the Komsomol, I promise, and now allow me to add a word or two to your self-critical statement. Before May Day your co-operative store manager asked for two carts to go to the stanitsa and fetch goods, didn't he?"

"He did."

"Did you give them?"

"Couldn't manage it. We were ploughing and sowing, both at the same time. There was no time for shopping."

"And you couldn't even spare two carts? Rubbish! Drivel! You could have done, and without much harm to the field work. But you didn't try, didn't want to! You didn't think: 'How will this affect the mood of the farm members?' And as a result, to get the basic necessities—soap, salt, matches and paraffin—and just before a public holiday, the Gremyachy women had to tramp to the stanitsa on foot. What did they say to each other after that about our Soviet government? Or doesn't that matter to you? But we didn't fight to have people cursing our social system, we didn't fight for that!" Nesterenko shouted in a voice that had suddenly become thin and high-pitched. And he concluded in almost a whisper: "Can't you grasp even a simple truth like that, Semyon? Come to your senses, dear comrade, open your eyes!"

Davidov crushed the butt of his cigarette in his fingers, stared at the ground and for a long time was silent. All his life he had been exceptionally restrained in showing the feelings that struggled within him. He might be accused of other things, but never of sentimentality. Yet at that moment some unknown force prompted him and he warmly embraced Nesterenko and even brushed his firm lips against the secretary's unshaven cheek. His voice was trembling with emotion when he said:

"Thank you, dear Nesterenko! My very deepest thanks! You're a good chap, and it'll be easy to work with you, not like with Korchzhinsky. You've told me some bitter things, but they're all true, and that's a fact! Only for God's sake, don't think I'm a hopeless case! I'll do what's got to be done, we'll all try to do it; I'll think over quite a lot of things, there are enough of them. . . . Believe me, Comrade Nesterenko!"

Nesterenko was no less moved but did not show it. He coughed a little and screwed up his brown eyes.

They were no longer merry. After a few minutes in which neither of them spoke he gave a shiver and said quietly: "I believe in you and the other lads and I'm relying on you as much as I would on myself. Remember that well, Semyon Davidov! Don't let the district committee down, and don't let me down. You mustn't! We, Communists, are like the soldiers of one company, we can't afford to lose faith in each other for a single minute! You know that perfectly well. And let's have no more of these unpleasant talks, to hell with them! I don't like them, though you've got to have them sometimes. You have a set-to like this with a friend, and then you can't sleep all night afterwards for the pain it's caused you. . . ."

Davidov looked closely into Nesterenko's face as he shook his hand warmly, and started in amazement. It was no longer a cheerful story-teller, a sociable easy-going fellow ready for a joke and a wrestle who sat beside him, but a tired, elderly man. Nesterenko's eyes seemed suddenly to have aged, deep furrows had appeared round the corners of his mouth, and even the brown ruddiness of his prominent cheeks seemed to have faded and yellowed. In a few short minutes Nesterenko had become a different man.

"Time I was on my way, I'm outstaying my welcome," he said rising heavily from the marmot burrow.

"You're not going to be ill, are you?" Davidov asked with alarm in his voice. "You're looking very queer all of a sudden."

"You've guessed it," Nesterenko replied despondently. "I'm starting an attack of malaria. I picked it up a long time back, in Central Asia, and I can't get rid of the damn thing!"

"What were you doing in Central Asia? What did you have to go there for?"

"It wasn't to buy peaches, if that's what you think. I liquidated the *basmach* bands, but I can't liquidate my own blessed malaria. The doctors have done all they can, so now I can like it or lump it. But that's another matter, this is what I want to tell you to finish up with. The counter-revolutionaries are stirring in this area, it's the same in the Stalingrad region. They're still counting on something, the dim-witted fools! How does the song go? 'They wanted to beat us and to beat us they tried. . . .'"

"'But they didn't catch us napping because we kept wide. . . .'" Davidov added.

"That's right. And we've still got to be on the look out." Nesterenko scratched his eyebrow thoughtfully and gave a grunt of annoyance: "Well, it can't be helped, I'll have to give away a very valuable thing. . . . Now we're bound ourselves in friendship, you'd better take this little toy as a present. It may come in useful. Nagulnov has been shot at, and you'd better look out, too, or things may go badly. . . ."

He pulled a dully gleaming No. 2 Browning pistol out of his pocket and placed it on Davidov's palm.

"This little object will probably come in handier in defence than a set of mechanic's tools."

Davidov squeezed Nesterenko's hand hard and his voice was thick with emotion as he muttered: "Thanks for such comradely, how shall I put it. . . . Yes, for taking such a friendly interest, and that's a fact! My real thanks to you!"

"Keep it," Nesterenko replied humorously. "But mind you don't lose it. Old soldiers get absent-minded as the years go by, you know. . . ."

"I shan't lose it as long as I live, and if I do, I'll lose my head with it," Davidov assured him putting the pistol away in the back pocket of his trousers.

But the next moment he took it out again, and glanced worriedly first at the pistol, then at Nesterenko: "This is a bit awkward. . . . How will you manage unarmed? Here, take it back, I don't need it!"

Nesterenko pushed his hand gently aside.

"Don't worry, I've got another. That's a spare one. The other's my most cherished possession, it was presented to me, and it's got my name engraved on it. Do you think I spent five years fighting in the army for nothing?" Nesterenko winked and even tried to smile, but his smile was ill and tortured.

He shivered again and worked his shoulders to overcome his trembling. Between pauses he said: "Shaly was boasting to me the other day about the present you gave him. I went to see him and he gave me tea with comb-honey. We were talking about life in general, and he goes to the chest and brings out your set of tools. 'I've only had two gifts in all my life: a pouch from my old woman when she was still a girl and casting eyes at me, a young smith, and this here set of tools that Comrade Davidov presented to me personally for my good work at the anvil. Two presents in all my long life! And how much iron I've nursed in my hands through all these years of hammering and smoke—you couldn't count it! That's why I've got those presents so close to my heart, though they may be lying in that chest!' Yes, he's a good old man! He's lived a fine life of toil, and God grant everyone, as they say, the ability to do so much for people as that old smith has done with those big hands of his. So, you see, your present was worth much more than mine."

They walked back fast to the team's wagon. Nesterenko was already shaking in every limb.

Rain was again coming up from the west. Ragged scraps of cloud, first precursors of the bad weather, were drifting low over the steppe. The young grass and

damp black earth had a fermenting smell. The sun that had shown for a while through the clouds hid itself again, and now, catching the fresh breeze with their broad wings, two steppe eagles were already soaring into the unknown heights. The silence that greets the approach of rain enveloped the steppe in a soft blanket and only the susliks whistled sharply and anxiously, forecasting a long downpour.

"Have a lie-down in our wagon and go on afterwards. If you're caught in the rain, you'll get soaked and be laid up for months," Davidov insisted.

But Nesterenko flatly refused. "Impossible. I've got a meeting at three. The rain won't catch me. I've got a good horse."

His hands were shaking like an old man's when he untied the bridle and tightened up the saddle girths. Giving Davidov a quick hug he sprang with unexpected agility on to his impatient horse and shouted: "I'll get warm on the road!" And went off at a fast canter.

At the soft drumming of hoofs Darya Kupriyanovna popped out of the wagon like leavened dough out of the kneeding trough and clapped her hands in despair: "He's gone?! And he hasn't had any breakfast! Oh, how could he?!"

"He felt ill," Davidov said sending a long look after the secretary.

"Oh, how stupid I am!" Darya Kupriyanovna wailed. "Such a good kind man and I didn't give him anything to eat! He's one of the office workers by the look of it but he didn't turn up his nose at peeling potatoes while you were snoring away, chairman. He's not like our Cossacks, they're not a patch on him. A fat lot of help you get from our men. All they can do is guzzle like pigs and sing their own praises to the new moon, but as for helping the cook—never! And how nice he talked to me! Another man would never think of anything so

sweet and charming in a month of Sundays!" she boasted, pursing her lips affectedly and casting sidelong glances at Davidov to see the effect of her words.

Davidov was not listening to her. He was thinking of his recent conversation with Nesterenko. But once she had got talking Darya Kupriyanovna found it hard to stop, and she went on: "You're a fine one, I must say, Davidov, may the plague take you! You might have told me that he was going away. And I missed him, fool that I am. Oh, what a pity! I expect he thinks the cook hid herself in the wagon to keep away from him, but my heart went out to him right from the very start."

Davidov remained silent and Darya Kupriyanovna vented her feelings without interference:

"Just look how he sits on his horse! As if he had been born and bred on horseback! He doesn't even sway, my young eagle! There's a Cossack if ever there was one, and one of the old school, too!" she effused, her eyes fixed enchantedly on the receding figure of the horseman.

"He's not a Cossack, he's a Ukrainian," Davidov said absently and sighed. He was feeling rather sad now that Nesterenko had left. At this Darya Kupriyanovna flared up like dry gunpowder.

"Tell your grandmother such tales, not me! I tell you he's a real Cossack! Have you got mud in your eyes? You can see he's a Cossack a mile away from the way he rides, and you can tell it close up by his appearance, his smartness. And by the way he treats a woman, you can see he's a Cossack. He's not one of the timid kind," she added significantly.

"All right, have it your way, if he's a Cossack he's a Cossack, it doesn't cut any ice with me," Davidov conceded. "But he's a fine chap, isn't he? How did he strike you? You had a nice long talk with him until you woke me up, didn't you?"

And now it was the cook's turn to sigh, and she sighed to the depths of her mighty bosom, and so violently that her old blouse split from the arm-pit all the way down the seam.

"He's an exceptionally fine man!" she answered slowly, with great feeling, and then for no particular reason made a furious clatter with the pots and pans, shifting, or rather flinging, them about the table without aim or purpose.

CHAPTER NINE

Davidov walked with long, easy strides. On reaching the top of the rise, he stopped and looked back at the camp, which was as usual deserted at this hour of the day, and at the ploughed land stretching across the opposite slope almost to the horizon. Say what you like, but he had put his back into it the past few days and neither his driver, Varya, nor Kondrat's oxen need feel offended with him for working them harder than they had bargained for. . . . He would like to see this stretch of land in the autumn. It would probably be covered with the bushy green of winter wheat; the morning frosts would touch it with silver, and at noon, when the low sun in its aura of pale blue gave a little warmth, the wheat would sparkle, as after a heavy shower, with all the colours of the rainbow, and every drop would reflect the cold autumn sky, the feathery foam-white clouds and the fading sun.

From a distance the ploughland, girdled by the green of the steppe, resembled a huge outspread strip of black velvet. Only at its very edge, on the northern slope, where the loam lay near the surface, was there a rough fringe of reddish-brown. The upturned clods of black earth, glazed by the ploughshares, gleamed dully along

the furrows; above them the rooks were circling; and far away, like a lonely snowdrop on the black ploughland, a faint pale-blue dot could be seen. Abandoning her work, in which she had now lost all interest, Varya Kharlamova was sauntering with drooping head towards the camp. And Kondrat Maidannikov was sitting motionless in a furrow, smoking. What else could he do without a driver, when his oxen with the gadflies swarming round them had got quite out of hand?

Catching sight of Davidov, who had halted at the top of the rise, Varya also halted, slipped off her kerchief and waved it gently. The silent timid appeal made Davidov smile. He waved his cap in reply and walked on, glancing back no more.

The self-willed little hussy! Very nice girl on the whole, but spoilt and obstinate, and that's a fact! Davidov reflected as he walked along. But are there any girls that aren't spoilt? Do you ever find one with none of this glad-eye stuff about her at all? They never come my way, not even in my dreams. . . . As soon as one of these good-lookers gets to sixteen or seventeen, there she goes, dolling herself up, trying to make herself even prettier than she is, testing her powers on us menfolk, and that's a fact! And now here's poor little Varya trying to rope me in, showing us what she's made of. But it won't get her anywhere. We, men of the Baltic fleet, are old hands at the game! And why is she going back to camp? She's just sauntering along, so it can't be because Kondrat sent her. She must have taken it upon herself to slip away for some silly reason of her own. Maybe because I've left the team? Well, if that's the reason, it's a sheer disgrace, a blatant violation of labour discipline! If she has a good reason, then she's at liberty to go where she likes, but if it's just from some whim of her own, she'll have to be told off at the very next team meeting, and no allowances made for her

youth and her good looks! Ploughing isn't a Sunday amusement, and she'd better do her work properly.

His feelings were strangely mixed at that moment. On the one hand, he was indignant with Varya for taking liberties, on the other, his male vanity was flattered by the thought that it was because of him that the girl had temporarily abandoned her work.

He remembered how one of his Leningrad friends, also an ex-sailor, when making advances to a girl, would draw him aside and, trying to sound serious, whisper conspiratorially: "Semyon, I'm about to close with the enemy. If I get into difficulties, give me flanking support, and if I'm hit, be a good chap and cover my shameful retreat." Davidov smiled at these memories of the distant past. No, it's no use my closing with an "enemy" like Varya. She's the wrong age, she belongs to a different crew. . . . And as soon as I made a step to go after her, the collective farmers would start thinking I was a terrible lady-killer. But how the hell can I be a lady-killer when I can't even cope with Lushka. No, that kid can only be loved seriously, my conscience wouldn't let me just fool around with her. Why, she's as pure as the sunrise on a fine morning, and her eyes are so clear when she looks at me. . . . So if I haven't learned to love properly, if I don't understand that side of things yet, then there's no point in worrying the girl's head for nothing. Now it's a case of cut your moorings, seaman Davidov, and be quick about it! And I think I'd better keep away from her in future. Yes, I'll just tell her gently, so she'll understand, then keep away, Davidov decided with an involuntary sigh.

As he meditated on his not very happily arranged life in Gremyachy Log and on the tasks set before him by the new district committee secretary, his thoughts again returned to Lushka. How can I unravel that sailor's knot without hurting anyone? Looks as if Makar is right: when

you can't loosen a knot with your fingers or your teeth, you've just got to slash it! But how the hell! It'll be very hard for me to part with her for ever. But why? Why should it be easy for Makar and difficult for me? It can't be that I haven't got character enough? I'd never have thought that of myself! Perhaps it wasn't easy for Makar either, only he didn't show it? Yes, Makar managed to hide his feelings, but I don't know how, I just can't. That's what it is!

Without noticing it, Davidov had covered a fair distance. Leaving the road he lay down under a hawthorn bush to rest and smoke in the shade. For a long time he cast about in his mind, trying to think who might have fired at Nagulnov, but eventually dismissed all his conjectures in annoyance. Even had the shot never been fired, everyone knew there was still some scum left in the village after the dispossessing of the kulaks. I'll have a word with Makar and find out how it all happened, then perhaps we'll get somewhere. It's no use racking your brains for nothing, he thought.

To shorten the journey, he turned off the road and set out straight across virgin land, but he had not gone half a kilometre when suddenly he seemed to cross an invisible boundary into another, quite different world. The rich fodder grass no longer rustled against his boots. Gone was the brightness of the flowers; the heady scents of blossoming abundant herbage had fled, evaporated into air, and the bare steppe, grey and forbidding, stretched far into the distance before him.

So joyless was this barren wasteland—it looked as if it had recently been ravaged by fire—that Davidov began to feel uneasy. Looking about him, he realised that he had come out on the top of the Lone Ravine, on a stretch of barren land of which Ostrovnov had once said at a meeting of the management board: "In the Caucasus the Lord must have had a reason for making

all those mountains and covering the earth with a lot of perishing bumps, so you can't walk or drive anywhere. But why he picked on us, Gremyachy Cossacks—that I just can't make out. Salted nearly half a thousand desyatins of good earth, so that no one will ever be able to plough it or sow it till doomsday. In the spring it raises a little grass, but not for long; and then you can turn your back on the whole blasted lot till the next spring. That's all it's good for, to feed the village sheep for a fortnight; after that it's ours on paper, but the lizards and snakes take it over."

Davidov slowed his pace, going round the big salt-caked ruts and stepping across deep pot-holes left by the hoofs of cows and sheep and polished smooth by their rough tongues. The bitter, salted earth in these holes looked like mottled grey marble.

This sombre land stretched for about five kilometres, right as far as Wet Gully. Smudged with greyish-white plumes of feather grass and the dry cracked bareness of salt pits, it seemed to flow and quiver in the hot breath of noon. But even here, on this barren earth, there was life that could not be extinguished. Red-winged grasshoppers sprang from under Davidov's feet; lizards, grey as the earth, slithered away silently; susliks exchanged warning whistles; a ring-tail swooped low over the steppe and seemed to dissolve into the grass, but the trusting larks allowed him to approach almost within arm's length, then flew up unwillingly and, gaining height, vanished in the milky blue haze of the sky, where their endless trilling was muffled but sweeter to the ear.

In early spring, as soon as the first thaw patches appeared in the snow, the larks would fly to this stretch of land, which for all its dullness seemed to hold some great attraction for them, weave their nests from the straggling grass of the previous year, rear their young,

and until late in the autumn delight the steppe with that artless song that men know and love from childhood. Davidov nearly trod on one such nest which had been skilfully woven in the cup left by some passing horse's hoof. He drew his foot away anxiously and bent down. The old nest seemed to be abandoned. Round it there lay tiny feathers stuck together by the rain, and small fragments of egg-shell.

The mother has taken her young away, he thought. I wonder what young larks look like. Somehow I don't remember any when I was a boy. And he smiled sadly. Even all the little birds make their nests and rear families for themselves, but here am I, been kicking my heels as a bachelor for nearly forty years and still don't know if I shall ever see any little ones of my own. . . . Perhaps I ought to be getting married in my old age?

He suddenly burst out laughing as he imagined himself for a moment a well-established married man with a good plump wife, like Darya Kupriyanovna, and a host of children of various ages. He had often seen such photographs in the show-cases outside photographers' shops in provincial towns. And the sudden thought of marriage appeared to him so absurd and foolish that he even waved his hand disparagingly and strode on more cheerfully towards the village.

Without going home Davidov walked straight to the farm management office. He was anxious to ask Nagulnov about all that had happened.

The big grass-grown yard of the management office was deserted except for a few of the neighbours' hens scratching lazily in the dung near the stables. Under the lean-to shed by the barn stood the motionless figure of Trofim the goat, deep in senile meditation. Noticing Davidov, the goat came to life, shook its beard challengingly, pawed the ground and trotted forward briskly to intercept the intruder. Half-way across the yard it

lowered its head, belligerently elevated its stumpy brush-like tail and broke into a gallop. Its intentions were so obvious that Davidov halted with a smile and prepared to meet the attack of his bearded challenger.

"So that's how you welcome the chairman of the collective farm? I'll make a football out of you this time, you old devil!" Davidov exclaimed laughing and managed to seize the goat by one of its ribbed and curly horns. "Now you can come into the office and be dealt with, friend of Shchukar, you idle bully!"

Trofim displayed complete submission and trotted after Davidov, giving its head an occasional shake and politely endeavouring to free its horn. But on the first step of the porch it suddenly made a firm stand, braking with all four feet, and when Davidov stopped pulling, came up to him trustingly, nuzzling his pocket and making funny little movements with its grey lips.

Davidov shook his head and, striving to make his voice as expressive as possible, addressed the goat reproachfully:

"Now then, Trofim! You're an old man, you know, one of our pensioners, so to speak, but you still won't give up your tricks. You try to fight everyone you meet, and then, when it doesn't work, you start begging for bread. I don't think much of you, really I don't! Now, what do you smell there?"

In his pocket, under a tobacco pouch and matches, Davidov felt a stale crust of bread that had been lying there for a long time, cleaned it carefully of the dry grains of tobacco that were sticking to it, and for some reason smelled it himself before offering it to the goat. The goat had its head on one side in a wheedling manner and was looking up at Davidov with the ancient eyes of one of the older satyrs, but on being offered the modest tit-bit, scarcely sniffed at it and, grunting scornfully, retired from the porch with dignity.

"You can't be very hungry," Davidov said with unconcealed annoyance. "You were never in the army, you mangy devil! You'd have been only too glad to eat this if you had. Smells of tobacco, does it! So what! You must have a lot of blue blood in your veins, you old fuss-pot. You're very choosy, and that's a fact!"

Davidov threw the crust away, went into the cool passage, scooped up a mugful of water from an iron pot and drank it thirstily. Only then did he feel how the journey and the heat had tired him.

There was no one in the office but Razmyotnov and the collective-farm book-keeper. At the sight of Davidov, Razmyotnov's face broke into a smile.

"Got back, old salt? Well, that's a load off my shoulders! This collective-farm management is a headache I wouldn't wish anybody to have. Now there's not enough coal in the forge, now the water pump's broken. First one thing, then another. . . . This job's too nerve-racking for me! If I had to sit here another week, I'd start throwing such fits it'd be a pleasure to watch me."

"How's Makar?"

"Alive."

"I know that, but what's his shell-shock like?"

Razmyotnov frowned. "Now how can you get shell-shock from a bullet? They didn't fire at him with a six-pounder, you know. He just wagged his head a bit, dabbed some vodka on the scratch, drank what was left in the bottle, and that was that."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone out to his team."

"But how did it all happen?"

"Very simple. Makar was sitting by his open window at night, with our new scholar, Granfer Shchukar, on the other side of the table. And someone just took a pot at him with a rifle. Who did it, only the dark night knows.

But one thing's clear: the fellow who held the rifle was a dim-wit."

"Why's that so clear?"

Razmyotnov's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Why?! Would you miss with a rifle at thirty paces? In the morning we found the spot he fired from. There was an empty cartridge case lying there. I measured the distance myself; it was exactly twenty-eight paces from the fence to the wall of the house."

"At night you could miss even at thirty paces."

"No, you couldn't!" Razmyotnov retorted heatedly. "I shouldn't have missed! We can try it out if you like. Tonight you can go and sit where Makar sat, and give me a rifle. I'll make a neat little hole right between your eyes with one bullet. No, it couldn't have been a proper soldier that fired the shot."

"Give me more of the details."

"All in good time. About midnight I heard firing going on in the village. One rifle shot, then two softer ones, like a pistol, and then again a sharp crack from a rifle; you could tell by the sound. I snatched my revolver from under my pillow and ran out into the street, pulling on my trousers as I ran. The shooting seemed to be coming from Makar's house, so I made for there. I'm afraid I thought it was Makar getting up to something....

"It didn't take me a second to get there. I knocked at the door. It was locked, but I could hear someone moaning pitifully inside. So I gave the door a couple of good shoves with my shoulder, broke the catch, rushed inside and lighted a match. In the kitchen a pair of legs were sticking out from under a bed. So I got hold of them and pulled. Lord alive, what a squeal someone let out under the bed, like a stuck pig! It gave me a bit of scare but I didn't let him go and pulled him into the middle of the kitchen. And it wasn't anyone at all, at least not a man, it was Makar's old landlady. I asked

her where Makar was, but she was so scared she couldn't say a word.

"So I rushed into Makar's room. I tripped over something soft and when I got to my feet, the thought stabbed me like a knife—Makar's been killed, that's him lying there! Somehow I managed to light another match and have a look. And there was old Shchukar lying on the floor, looking up at me with one eye open and the other closed. The old fellow had blood on his forehead and cheek. 'Are you alive?' I asked. 'Where's Makar?' And he in his turn asks me: 'Andrei, old friend, tell me, for God's sake, am I alive or not?' And his voice was so faint and gentle I thought the old fellow really was pegging out. . . . So I tried to comfort him and said: 'If you can use your tongue, you must be still alive, but you're beginning to smell very much like a corpse.' Then he wept bitterly and said: 'It must be my soul leaving my body, that's why I smell so queer. I may be still alive, but I'll die very soon. I've got a bullet in my head.'"

"What the hell!" Davidov interrupted impatiently. "But why had he got blood on his face? I don't get this at all! Was he wounded, too, or what?"

Chuckling to himself, Razmyotnov continued: "No one was wounded, everything turned out all right. Well, I went and closed the shutters just in case, and lighted the lamp. Shchukar was still lying calmly on his back, except that he had closed his other eye and folded his hands on his belly. And he lay there as if he was in his coffin—not a movement, just like a corpse! In a little polite voice he asks me: 'For God's sake, go and call my old woman. I want to say good-bye to her before I die.'

"So then I bent down and shone the lamp on him." Razmyotnov gave a snort and stifled his laughter with an effort. "By the light of the lamp I saw that he, I mean Shchukar, had a splinter of wood in his forehead. . . . The bullet must have snicked a splinter off the window-frame

and, as it flew off, it must have got him in the forehead. It broke the skin and the old fat-head thought it was a bullet and collapsed on the floor. Here was the old fellow, dying before my eyes, and there was nothing wrong with him at all! I could hardly straighten up for laughing. Well, of course, I pulled out the splinter and said to the old chap: 'I've removed the bullet from your brain. Now get up, don't lie about there for nothing. Only just tell me this. Where's Makar got to?'

"When I looked at him again, Granfer Shchukar had cheered up a bit, but he seemed to be rather shy about getting up while I was around. He was squirming about on the floor, but he wouldn't get up. . . . But even lying down, that goddam' liar started telling me the tale. 'When the enemy fired at me,' he says, 'and the bullet struck me right in the forehead, I fell down as if I'd been pole-axed, and became unconscientious, and in the meantime Makar put out the lamp, jumped through the window and rushed off somewhere. That's a friend for you. There was I lying wounded, nearly done to death, and he takes to his heels and leaves me to the mercy of the enemy. Andrei, old chap, show me the bullet that nearly killed me. God willin', I'll stay alive and put it as a precious keepsake under my old woman's icons.'

" 'No,' I says to him, 'I can't show you the bullet, it's all covered with blood and you might faint if you saw it. We'll send this famous bullet off to Rostov. as a relic for the museum.' At that the old fellow got even more cheerful, rolled smartly over on his side and asked: 'Why not, Andrei? Mebbe for this heroic wound and for survivin' such an attack by the enemy, the high-ups will award me some kind of medal or other?' But that was trying my patience a bit too far. I shoved the splinter into his hand and said: 'Here's your "bullet", it won't do for a museum. Put it under your blooming icon and keep it there, and in the meantime go to the well, wash

your heroic self and make yourself tidy. At the moment you stink like a cattle grave.'

"Shchukar made himself scarce, and soon afterwards Makar turned up, panting like a blown horse, and sat down at the table without a word. When he got his breath back, he said: 'Missed the blighter! I fired twice. It was dark, I couldn't see the sights, I just aimed along the barrel—and missed! And he stopped for a second and had another bash at me. I think I felt something snick my tunic.' Makar pulled at his tunic and there really was a hole through one of the folds in the right side just above the belt. 'Didn't you see who it was?' I asked him. He just laughed. 'I haven't got owl's eyes. All I know is he was a young fellow, because he was darn quick off the mark. An old man couldn't have run like that. I ran after him, but it was hopeless! A horseman couldn't have caught up with him!' 'How come you took such a risk,' I said, 'chasing after him like that without knowing how many of them there were? Suppose there had been another pair like him waiting for you behind the fence, then what? Even if there'd been only one, he could have let you come up and fired point-blank.' But can you ever get any agreement out of Makar? 'What do you think I ought to have done?' he says. 'Put the light out and crawled under the bed?'

"And that's everything just as it happened. The only thing Makar got out of that bullet was a cold."

"What's a cold got to do with it?"

"Who knows! He says so, but I must say it surprises me. What are you laughing at? He really did catch an awful cold after that shot. His nose is running like a river and you'd think someone was firing a machine-gun when he sneezes."

"Just an utter lack of education," the book-keeper, an elderly Cossack who had once been a regimental clerk, put in disapprovingly. He pushed his tarnished sil-

ver-rimmed spectacles on to his forehead and repeated drily: "Comrade Nagulnov's just showing his lack of education, that's all."

"It's the uneducated chaps that have to face the music these days," Razmyotnov said with a grim laugh. "You're mighty educated, you are, you make a fine row with those abacus beads and put all those squiggles on your handwriting, but it wasn't you they fired at, it was Nagulnov." And addressing Davidov, he went on: "Early in the morning I call in to see him and there he is, having such an argument with the doctor that the devil himself couldn't make head or tail of it! The doctor's saying that Makar got a cold from sitting up at night before an open window in a draught, and Makar insists that he got a cold because the bullet touched a nerve in his nose. 'How could the bullet touch a nerve in your nose, when it only grazed your temple?' asks the doctor. And Makar replies: 'It's none of your business how it touched it, the fact is that the nerve's been touched, and your business is to heal this nervous cold I've got and not argue over something you know nothing about.'

"Now Makar's as obstinate as a mule, but that old doctor was even more so. 'Stop bothering me with your stupid ideas,' he says. 'When a man's nerves go wrong he gets a twitch in one eyelid, not two, and only one of his cheeks twitches, not both of them. So why haven't you got a cold in one nostril, instead of its pouring out of both? It must be because you've been in a draught.'

"Makar kept quiet just for a second, then he asked: 'Look here, you barrack-room quack, did anyone ever box your ears?'

"Just in case of trouble, I shift up closer to Makar, so I can grab his arm in time, and the doctor does the opposite, moves away from him and, with one eye on the door, says doubtfully: 'N-no, the Lord has spared me that. Why do you want to know?'

"Makar asks him again: 'Well, if I strike you on the left ear with my fist, do you think that only the left ear will ring? Rest assured, you'll get a clanging in both ears that'll remind you of Eastertide!'

"The doctor gets up from his chair, edges along to the door, and Makar says: 'Don't lose your temper, man, sit down, I wasn't going to hit you, I'm just giving you an example, don't you see?'

"Now why should that doctor be losing his temper? He had been making for the door as a precaution, but after what Makar had said he sat down on the very edge of his chair and still he couldn't help glancing at the door now and again. . . . Makar bunches his fist, examines it from all sides, as if he'd never seen it before, and again he asks: 'And suppose I give you another little present on the ear-hole, then what will happen?' Again the doctor gets up and edges away to the door. With his hand on the door-handle he says: 'You're talking a lot of nonsense! Your fists have nothing whatever to do with medicine or with nerves!' 'Oh yes, they have,' Makar replies to that, and again asks the doctor to sit down and politely offers him a chair. But now the doctor for no particular reason suddenly breaks out in an awful sweat and announces that he's in a terrible hurry because he's got to see his patients. But Makar replies firmly that the patients can wait a few minutes, and that the argument must go on, and that he, Makar, hopes to show the doctor a thing or two about medical science."

Davidov smiled wearily, the book-keeper gave a little, old-womanish snigger, covering his mouth with his hand, but Razmyotnov, maintaining an air of complete seriousness, continued:

" 'So look here,' says Makar, 'if I hit you on that spot twice, don't think the tears will spring from only one eye. They'll spurt out of both, like juice out of a ripe tomato. You can rely on me for that anyhow. And it's

the same thing with a nervous cold. If the left nostril runs, the right nostril has to run too. Have I made myself clear?' But then the doctor plucks up courage and says: 'Don't go on rambling like this, please, if you don't understand anything about medicine; and treat yourself with the drops I prescribe for you.' That made Makar jump! He nearly hit the ceiling. Then he shouts in a voice that isn't his own: 'I don't understand anything about medicine?! Why, you old bum-stuffer! In the German war I was wounded four times, shell-shocked twice and gassed once; in the Civil War I was wounded three times; I've been in thirty hospitals of one kind or another, and you say I don't understand anything about medicine?! Do you know, you mouldy laxative powder, what doctors and professors have treated me? You've never even dreamed about such people, you old fool!' But this time the doctor really lost his temper—how he found the courage, I don't know!—and he bawls at Makar: 'You may have been treated by learned people,' he says, 'but you yourself, my dear fellow, know as much about medicine as a block of wood!' And to that Makar replies: 'And you know as much about medicine as a hole in a wall! All you can do is sew up babies' belly-buttons and put old men's ruptures right, and you know less about nerves than a sheep knows about the Bible! You've got no idea at all what that branch of science is about!'

"Well, they blasted each other properly and the doctor went rolling out of Makar's room like a reel of thread. And when Makar had calmed down a bit, he says to me: 'You go back to the office and I'll give myself a little homemade treatment; I'll just rub my nose with cooking-fat and be along in a minute.' You ought to have seen him when he got here an hour later, Davidov! His nose had swelled up as big and blue as an egg-plant,

and it was sort of hanging down on one side. He must have put it out of joint when he was rubbing it. And the stink of mutton fat that came from Makar, from his nose, that is, filled the whole office. He thought he'd get it well by rubbing. . . . I just took one look at him and, believe me, I doubled up with laughter. The man had absolutely disfigured himself! I wanted to ask him what he had done to himself but I was laughing so much I couldn't get breath to do so. And he got terribly angry. 'What are you laughing at, you blithering idiot?' he asks me. 'Found a shiny button in the street, or what? What are you so overjoyed about, son of Trofim? You've got as much brain as our goat Trofim and you laugh at respectable folk!'

"So he goes off to the stables and I follow him. I look inside and there's Makar taking down his saddle and putting it on the chestnut. Then he leads it out of the stable—and all without a word. I had put his back up by laughing at him, you see. 'Where're you off to?' I ask. And he just grunts back at me: 'Anywhere I can find a stick to beat you with.' 'What's this for?' I ask. But he wouldn't say anything. So I walked along with him. We were silent all the way to his house. At the gate he tossed me the reins and went indoors. Next minute out he comes, a revolver in a holster strapped over his shoulder, all in proper order. And in his hands he's got a towel. . . ."

"A towel?" Davidov said in surprise. "What was the towel for?"

"Didn't I tell you he had a terrible cold? No handkerchief was any good and he'd be ashamed to blow it out on the ground like we do, even in the steppe." Razmyotnov smiled subtly. "Oh, don't you underrate him; he's studying English, you know, he mustn't show a lack of culture. . . . That's why he took the towel along with him. I said to him: 'You ought to bandage up your head,

Makar, and cover that wound!' And then he went right off the deep end: 'Do you call this scratch a wound, confound you! I don't need any of this woman's coddling! While I'm riding out to the team, the wind will blow on it and dust will settle on it and it'll heal up like an old dog's hide. Stop shoving your nose into other people's business and get out of here with your daft advice!'

"I saw that after his set-to with the doctor and my laughing at him like that he was in a very bad mood. So I just advised him very gently not to go about with his revolver showing. What was the good! He sent me to hell and said: 'What do you expect me to do when I may get shot at any moment, go around with a kid's catapult? I've carried this revolver in my pocket for eight years, it's made holes in I don't know how many pockets, and I've had enough! From now on I'm going to wear it openly. I didn't steal it, I earned it with my own blood. Was it given to me on behalf of our dear Comrade Frunze for nothing? With a silver name-plate on the butt too! You've got some hopes, my lad. And again you're poking into other people's business!' And with that he got on his horse and rode away. I heard him blowing his nose on that towel all the way out of the village. Sounded like he was playing the trumpet. You'd better say a word to him. Semyon, about the revolver. Our people won't like it, you know. He'll listen to you."

Davidov was no longer taking in Razmyotnov's words. With his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, he stared at the pitted, ink-stained boards of the table, thinking of what Arzhanov had told him. All right, suppose Ostrovnov is a kulak, but why should I necessarily suspect him? He wouldn't use a rifle himself, he's too old and too clever for that, and Makar says it was a young quick-footed fellow who ran away from him. Suppose he and his son are in it together? All the same, you

can't sack Ostrovnov from his job as supply-manager without clear proof. That'll only scare him if he's mixed up in some plot or other, and it'll put the others on their guard too. But Ostrovnov wouldn't go in for a thing like that on his own. He's a clever devil and he'd never take such a risk alone. So we've got to treat him as we've always done and not show a sign of suspicion, otherwise we may spoil the whole thing. But we're getting warmer. . . . Soon I'll have to go to the district centre and have a word with the secretary there and the GPU chief. Our GPU is just fiddling about, but here someone's started fiddling with rifles at night. This time it was Makar, tomorrow it'll be me or Razmyotnov. No, this kind of thing won't do at all. If we don't start doing something, one of these scoundrels could finish off the three of us in as many days. But it's very unlikely that Ostrovnov would get involved in a counter-revolutionary gamble. He's a bit too careful, and that's a fact! What could he gain by it? He's supply-manager of the farm, a member of the management board, he's got all he needs to live on. No, I can't somehow believe he would turn back to the old ways. There can't be any going back, he must understand that. It'd be different if we were at war with one of our neighbours, then he might get activated, but I don't believe in his being active now.

Davidov's reflections were interrupted by Razmyotnov. He had been watching his friend's drawn face for some time in silence, then he suddenly asked in a business-like tone: "Did you have any breakfast this morning?"

"Breakfast? Why?" Davidov replied absently.

"You're thin as a rake, man! There's nothing but cheek-bones left of you, and even they've shrivelled up in the sun."

"Are you on that again?"

"No, I'm serious, honestly I am."

"I didn't have time for breakfast, and I don't want any. It's been such a hot morning."

"Well, I'm rather hungry. Come along with me, Semyon, and we'll have a bite," Razmyotnov suggested.

Davidov agreed reluctantly. They went out into the yard together and a dry, hot wind from the steppe, heavy with the scent of worm wood, blew in their faces.

At the gate Davidov stopped and asked: "Who do you suspect, Andrei?"

Razmyotnov gave a shrug and slowly spread his arms.

"Hanged if I know! I've thought about it any number of times without getting anywhere. I've been through all the Cossacks in the village and not found anything to go on. Some devil's given us a riddle to solve and now we've got to rack our brains over it. We had a comrade down here from the district GPU. He nosed about round Makar's house, questioned Makar, old Shchukar, Makar's landlady, and me, then had a look at the empty cartridge case, but it's not marked, you know... and that's all. Then he went away. 'Some enemy agent must have turned up round your way,' he said. And then Makar said: 'Have you ever been shot at by friends, you bright lad? Get to hell out of here! We'll sort it out ourselves.' The fellow just breathed heavily at that and didn't say anything, then got on his horse and rode away."

"What do you think, it couldn't have been Ostrovnov, could it?" Davidov asked cautiously.

But Razmyotnov, who had been about to lift the gate catch, dropped his hand in surprise and laughed.

"Are you crazy? Yakov Lukich? Why on earth should he do a thing like that? Why, he's afraid of a cart-wheel squeaking! You can chop my head off, but he'd never do that! Anyone else you like, but not he."

"What about his son?"

"You're aiming wide again. If you're just going to plunk your finger down at random, you may land on

me. No, there's more in it than that.... It's a real combination lock."

Razmyotnov pulled out his pouch and rolled a cigarette, but remembering that a few days before he had himself signed a regulation forbidding housewives to light fires during the day and men to smoke in the street, crushed the cigarette in annoyance. Noticing Davidov's puzzled glance, he replied absent-mindedly, as if he were speaking not of himself but of someone else:

"Putting round all these daft regulations! We can't smoke in the street. Come on, we'll light up inside."

For breakfast Razmyotnov's old mother gave them the usual thin millet gruel with a scant dressing of pork fat that Davidov was so tired of, but when she brought in a bowl of fresh cucumbers from the garden, he brightened up. With real pleasure he ate two cucumbers that smelled deliciously of earth and sun, washed them down with a mug of stewed fruit juice and got up from the table.

"Thanks, mother, that was fine, specially the cucumbers. The first cucumbers I've tried this year. They're fine, and that's a fact."

The kindly, talkative old lady nursed her cheek despondently: "And how do you expect to have cucumbers, you poor boy? You haven't got a wife, have you?"

"Haven't managed it yet. Can't find the time," Davidov smiled.

"If you can't find the time to get yourself a wife, then it's no use your expecting to have early cucumbers. You won't do all the planting and thinning out yourself, will you now? Here's my Andrei, he's left without a woman too. If he hadn't a mother to look after him, he'd be done for by now. But mother just manages it somehow. It makes me sad to look at you all, it does really. There's

my Andrei riding a bachelor sledge, and Makar, and you. You ought to be ashamed, all three of you! Three great bulls like you going about the village and out of luck with the women. Surely you won't all stay bachelors? Why, it's a proper disgrace!"

"But no one wants us, ma," Razmyotnov, chuckling to himself, teased his mother.

"And they never will if you stay bachelors another five years. What good will you old greybeards be to any woman, not to mention the girls—you're past the time for wooing them as it is."

"The girls won't have us—you say yourself we're too old—and we don't want widows. Feed another man's children? They can whistle for that!"

Such talk, apparently, was not new to Andrei, but Davidov said nothing and for some reason felt uncomfortable.

After thanking his kindly hosts and taking his leave, he went off to the smithy. Before the commission arrived he wanted to inspect the mowing-machines and horse-rakes himself, the more so because a part of his labour had gone into the mending of them.

CHAPTER TEN

The old smithy on the edge of the village greeted him with its familiar smells and sounds. Obedient to every movement of its master's hand, Shaly's hammer rang and danced as of old on the anvil; even from a distance one could still hear the asthmatic sighs of the ageing bellows; and as of old there still floated from the wide-open doors the bitter smell of burnt coal and the wonderful, unforgettable smell of cooling furnace scale.

It was bare and deserted round the lonely smithy. A hot smell of dust and goose-foot rose from the dirt

road close by. Wild hemp and weeds grew out of the turf that was packed firmly on the sagging wickerwork of the roof. Among them swarmed a host of sparrows. They always lived under the rafters of the old smithy, even in winter, and their endless twittering seemed to echo the lively, ringing chatter of the hammer and the clang of the anvil.

Shaly greeted him like an old friend. Tired of spending every day with only the furnace-boy for company, he was clearly glad to see Davidov.

"It's a very long time since we saw you, chairman!" he boomed cheerfully, extending a hand that was hard and firm as iron. "You're forgetting the proletariat, you don't come in to see us any more. You've got proud, lad, that's what it is. Well, I've come to see you now, is that what you say? Oh no! You've come to see the mowers. I know you, my lad! Well, come along, you can have a look, I've got 'em all out on parade, like a company of Cossacks. Come along. But no fault-finding, mind. You used to be my assistant once, so you've got no claim on anyone now."

Davidov examined each mower at length and with great care. But exacting though he was, he found no fault with the repairs, except for two or three minor defects; however, he properly offended the old smith. Shaly followed Davidov from one mower to the other, and wiping the perspiration from his purple face with his leather apron, muttered disapprovingly: "You're a mighty finicky sort of boss, you know. Mighty finicky these complaints of yours are. . . . What are you sniffing round for now? What are you after there? Who do you think I am, a Gypsy or what? Do a bit of tinkering, then off in my car-avan and that's the last you see of me? No, my lad, everything here's been done proper, like I'd do it for myself, and there's no need for you to sniff around trying to find fault."

"I'm not trying to find fault with you, Ippolit Sidorovich, what are you making such a fuss about?"

"Well, if you weren't fault-finding, you'd have finished your inspection long ago, but you keep nosing round every mower, sniffing at this, touching that. . . ."

"That's my job. Believe what you see, but not till you've felt it," Davidov retorted cheerfully.

But when he began a particularly thorough examination of one rickety old mower that before becoming collective property had belonged to Antip Grach, all Shaly's displeasure vanished in a flash. Clutching his beard in his fist and winking with a sly grin on his face at no one in particular, he said ironically:

"Go on, Davidov, lie down on the ground! Why are you strutting round it like a cock? You get down and test the cross-bar with your teeth. What are you pawing it for? Do you think it's a girl? Get your teeth into it, your teeth! Call yourself a smith! Don't you know your own work? You mended that mower yourself! I can tell you that for sure, my lad, it's all your own work, and now you don't even know it when you see it. You're the kind of lad who gets married one night and doesn't know his young wife next morning. . . ."

Pleased with his own joke, Shaly laughed uproariously, then started coughing and waving his arms, but Davidov, quite unconcerned, replied: "You needn't laugh, Ippolit Sidorovich. I knew this little mower at once, and my own work too. But I'm inspecting it as strictly as any of the others, so that it won't let us down at mowing time. If we get a breakdown with this scrap-heap bone-shaker, you'll be the first of anybody, even the mowers, to say: 'There you are, I trusted Davidov with a hammer and tongs, and now look what he's done!' Won't you?"

"Of course, I will! If you do the job, you're responsible."

"And you say I didn't know my own work. I knew it all right, but you've got to be stricter with yourself."

"So you don't trust yourself?"

"Not always. . . ."

"And that's the best way, lad," the smith agreed, suddenly becoming serious. "Our job with iron is such a responsible one. You can't become skilled at it in a hurry, that you can't. . . . It's not for nothing we, smiths, say: 'Trust in your anvil, your hand and your hammer, but don't trust your own mind when you're young.' It's the same job in a big works as it is in a little smithy, they're both alike and they're both important, and I can tell you that for sure. Last year I had the district manager from the Raw Material Purveying Department billeted on me; he had been made the department's representative in our village. The wife and I, we took him in and looked after him like our own son, but he wouldn't speak a word, neither to her nor to me; he thought that was beneath him. He'd sit down at table—not a word. He'd get up from table—still not a word. He'd come back from the village Soviet—not a word; and when he went out again—not a word. Whatever I asked him, whether it was about politics or household matters, he would grunt: 'That's none of your business, old man.' And that's as far as we got. Well, our lodger lived with us very quiet-like for three days, and on the fourth day he opened his mouth. . . . In the morning he puffs out his chest and says to me: 'Tell your old woman to bring me my potatoes on a plate, not in a frying pan, and tell her to put some kind of napkin on the table, and not a dish towel. I'm a cultured man,' he says, 'and what's more, I'm a responsible worker from district headquarters and I don't like such common ways.'

"That put my back up proper and I says to him: 'You're a stinking nit, not a cultured man! If you were cultured, you'd eat off what people gave you, and wipe

your mug with what they gave you, because we've never had any napkins in the house, and my old woman's broken all the plates. I'm not charging you a kopek for what you get, the missus doesn't know how best to please you, where to put your chair, how to make you more comfortable at night, and you turn up your nose higher than the roof: 'I'm a responsible worker!' 'Just how responsible are you?' I ask him. 'Fiddling about with hare and suslik skins in an office—that's all your responsibility. You're not a bit responsible; but I am! After the chairman and the Party secretary I'm the first man in this village, because without me there can be no ploughing and no mowing. My job's iron. yours is skin, which of us is more important?' I says. 'You consider yourself a responsible worker and I consider myself one. How can the two of us live together under the same roof? We can't! Take your brief-case, my dear man,' I says, 'and get out of here, because I've got no use for someone as stuck up as you.' "

Davidov screwed up his eyes until the pupils scarcely showed through narrow slits, and in a voice charged with laughter asked quietly: "So you turned him out?"

"Surely. Right away! And when he went, he didn't even say 'thank you' for what he had had, the responsible bastard."

"Well, good for you, Ippolit Sidorovich!"

"Not much good in it, but I just couldn't put up with a lodger like him."

When they had rested, Davidov resumed his inspection of the machines. It was past noon when he finished and said good-bye to Shaly. He thanked the smith warmly for his conscientious work and enquired: "How many work-day units did they assign you for this job?"

The old smith frowned and turned away: "A fat lot Yakov Lukich assigns you. . . ."

"What's Yakov Lukich got to do with it?"

"His word is law with the book-keeper. What he says goes."

"But how many did you get?"

"Next to nothing, lad."

"What do you mean, though? Why?"

The usually good-natured smith looked so angry that it might have been not Davidov who stood before him but Ostrovnov himself.

"Because they refuse to take into account the work I do. If I spend a day in the forge, they put me down for one work-day unit. But it makes no difference to them whether I worked there or made myself cigarettes all day. On repairs I may do five work-day units in a day, but they still only put me down for one. I can break my back at the anvil, but I won't earn more than one work-day unit a day. So on your wages, lad, a fellow won't get very fat. He'll stay alive, but he won't want to marry."

"They're not my wages!" Davidov said sharply. "They're not collective-farm wages! Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Shaly hesitated and answered with obvious reluctance: "How shall I put it, lad, it was kind of awkward. . . . I reckon I felt ashamed or something. I'd make up my mind to complain to you, then I'd think you might say: 'This fellow's greedy, he's never satisfied. . . .' And so I kept quiet. But I'm telling you now. And I'll say this too: they condescend to put down the kind of work that shows—repairing of ploughs, harrows, the visible equipment, so to speak; but when it comes to the little stuff, like shoeing a horse, or making the horseshoes, or chains, door hasps, hinges and that kind of thing—they won't hear of it. And I consider that wrong, because you waste a lot of time on little things like that."

"But who is this 'they' you keep talking about? The

book-keeper does his job alone and answers for it to the management," Davidov said exasperatedly.

"The book-keeper does his job and Yakov Lukich corrects him. You're telling me what ought to happen, but I'm telling you what does happen."

"Well, it's a very bad thing if that's what actually happens."

"It's not my fault, lad, it's yours."

"I know that without your telling me. It's got to be put right and put right quickly. Tomorrow we'll call a meeting of the management board and we'll question Yakov Lukich. . . . We'll question him thoroughly!" Davidov said emphatically.

But Shaly merely chuckled into his beard.

"He's not the one who needs talking to."

"Who does then, in your opinion? The book-keeper?"

"You."

"Me? Hm . . . well, go on then."

As if to estimate Davidov's strength, Shaly surveyed him from head to foot and said slowly: "Hold tight, lad! What I'm going to tell you now will hurt. . . . I don't want to say it but I've got to, because I'm afraid no one else will dare."

"Go on, go on," Davidov encouraged him, though he sensed that the conversation would not be a pleasant one, and felt particularly apprehensive at the thought that Shaly would probably bring up the subject of his relationship with Lushka. But contrary to his expectations, Shaly began with something else:

"To look at you, anyone would think you're a real chairman, but dig a bit deeper, and it turns out you're not chairman of the collective farm, but a kind of hanger-on, as they say."

"Well, that's nice!" Davidov exclaimed with rather affected cheerfulness.

"Nothing nice about it," Shaly continued grimly. "Nothing at all, and I'll tell you that for sure. You crawl about under the mowers, you make your inspection as a good chairman should, and you go out and live in the fields and plough yourself, but as for what goes on in the office—you don't know a darned thing about it. You ought to spend less time in the fields and more here, in the village, then things would get along better. But as it is, you're a ploughman, a smith, regular Jack-of-all-trades, as they say, and the man who runs the show is not you but Ostrovnov. You've let your power slip out of your hands and Ostrovnov has picked it up. . . ."

"Carry on," Davidov said drily. "Carry on, don't mind me."

"I will if you like," Shaly agreed willingly. He seated himself firmly on the cross-board of a mower, beckoned Davidov to sit down beside him and, noticing the little furnace-boy eavesdropping in the doorway, shouted fiercely: "Out of it, you little devil! Can't you find anything to do? He'd spend all day eavesdropping, the son-of-a-pig! I'll take my belt off in a minute and give you a good hiding, then you'll know! That'll stuff up your ears for you! What a good-for-nothing little brat that lad is!"

A dirty-faced youngster with a spark of laughter in his sharp little eyes darted like a mouse into the depths of the forge and soon the laboured breathing of the bellows was heard and a purple glow appeared as flames leapt from the furnace. Shaly, already smiling good-naturedly, said: "I'm teaching him to be a smith. He's an orphan. There's not a single one of the grown-up lads who'll come into the forge. Soviet rule has spoiled the lot of 'em! They all want to become doctors, or agronomists, or engineers of one kind or another, but what will happen when we old fellows are dead? Who'll mend the people's boots, make their trousers, shoe their horses?

And it's the same here with me. I can't get anyone who wants to be a blacksmith, they all run away from the smoke of a forge, like the devil from incense. I had to take this Vanya. He's a capable little devil, but the tyranny I have to put up with from him—there's no word for it! Either he's climbing into someone's orchard in the summer, and I have to answer for him. Or he'll give the forge the go-by and take himself off to go fishing for tiddlers; then he's up to something else. You can't do a thing with him! His own aunt who he lives with can't manage him, so I have to put up with his tyranny. And I can only curse at him, because I can't bring myself to beat an orphan. That's how it is, lad. It's a difficult business teaching other people's children, specially orphans. But in my lifetime I've turned out about ten of them to be real blacksmiths, and now in Tubyanskoy and Voiskovoy and other villages the forges are manned by smiths that I've trained, and there's even one of them working at a factory in Rostov. And that's something, lad. You've worked at a factory yourself and you know who they take on, and who they don't. And it makes me proud to think that though I've got to die one day, there'll be many lads alive in this world who learned their trade from me. Do I figure it out right?"

"Let's figure out what we started with. What other faults do you find in my work?"

"You've got only one fault: you're chairman only at meetings; for everyday work it's Ostrovnov. That's where all the trouble arises. I understand that to start with, in spring, you had to go and live with the ploughmen, set them an example of how to work together, learn how to plough yourself; that kind of thing does no collective-farm chairman any harm. But why you're wasting your time out there in the fields now, I just can't make out. Don't tell me the manager at the factory where you

worked spent all his days standing at a lathe. Somehow I can't believe it!"

Shaly talked at length about the troubles on the farm, about some things which Davidov never saw, and others which were carefully kept hidden from him by Ostrovnov, the book-keeper, and the storekeeper. Everything in Shaly's story pointed to the fact that the brain behind all the questionable happenings that had occurred since the founding of the collective farm had been, and still was, the apparently quiet and insignificant Ostrovnov.

"Why didn't you ever speak up at a meeting? Surely you value collective farming enough for that? And you say, 'I'm the proletariat!' What sort of a proletarian are you if you're afraid to raise your voice, and at meetings we need a lantern to find you with?"

Shaly bowed his head and for a long time twisted a stalk of grass in silence. It looked so strange, so light and fragile, in his huge, black, scarcely bending fingers that Davidov could not help smiling. Shaly scrutinised something at his feet with great care, as if the answer that he was to make depended on his scrutiny. After a long silence he asked: "In the spring you said at a meeting that Atamanchukov ought to be expelled from the farm, didn't you?"

"I did raise that question. What about it?"

"Was he expelled?"

"Unfortunately he was not; he ought to have been."

"Maybe it was unfortunate, that's not the point..."

"What is the point then?"

"Try and remember who spoke against it. You can't? Well, I'll remind you. There was Ostrovnov, and Afonka the storekeeper, and Lushnya, and about twenty others. It was them who put your good advice aside and turned the people against you. So Ostrovnov is not the only one at work. Do you follow?"

"Go on."

"Yes, I will. Then why do you ask why I don't speak at meetings? Perhaps I'd speak once or twice, but I might not manage it the next time. They'd knock me on the head in this very forge with the very same lump of iron I'd been heating in the fire and moulding with my hammer, and that would be the end of my speech-making. No, lad, I'm too old to speak. You can do the speaking alone; I want to smell furnace scale in the forge a bit longer."

"You're exaggerating the danger, man, and that's a fact!" Davidov said without conviction, for he was still completely under the impression of what the smith had just related.

But the latter surveyed Davidov keenly with his protruding black eyes and winked mockingly: "Mebbe in my old age and blindness I exaggerate as you say. But you, lad, don't see these dangers at all. All your young goings-on have darkened your mind, I can tell you that for sure."

Davidov made no reply. Now it was his turn to be thoughtful, and he was thoughtful for a long time; and now it was Davidov who twisted something in his fingers, not a blade of grass but a rusty bolt he had picked up off the ground. Many people in moments of reflection feel that inexplicable urge to toy with the first object that catches their eye. . . .

The sun had long since passed its zenith. The shadows had moved and the hot slanting sun-rays beat down on the sagging turf-and-weed-covered roof of the smithy, on the nearby mowers and the dusty roadside grass. Gre-myachy Log was wrapped in a stifling afternoon stillness. The shutters of the houses were closed; the streets were deserted; even the young calves that had been wandering idly about the lanes since morning had gone down to the river and hidden themselves in the dense

shade of osiers and willows. But Davidov and Shaly still sat in the scorching heat.

"Let's go into the forge, where it's cool. I'm not used to heat like this," Shaly suggested, wiping perspiration from his face and the bald patch on his head. "An old blacksmith is the same as an old lady: neither of them likes the sun. They both stick to their own kind of shade all their lives. . . ."

They moved into the shade and sat down on the warm ground on the north side of the smithy. Shaly settled himself close to Davidov and started buzzing like a bumble-bee lost in bindweed.

"Did they kill Khoprov and his wife? They did. What did they kill him for? Was it just a drunken brawl? No, lad, and that's the point. . . . There was something shady there. Nobody just kills a man for nothing. And I with my stupid old man's mind look at it this way. If he hadn't suited Soviet power, he'd have been arrested and sentenced to death in court, not on the quiet like that; but since he was killed on the quiet, and his wife, too, it must have been the enemies of Soviet power he didn't suit. Couldn't have been otherwise! And why did they kill his wife, I ask you. So she wouldn't give the murderers away to the authorities; she knew their faces! The dead don't talk, they're less trouble, lad. It couldn't be otherwise, I can tell you that for sure."

"Suppose we know all that without you telling us, suppose we guessed it. But who killed him—no one knows that." Davidov paused for a moment, then made a cunning thrust. "And no one will ever know it," he added.

Shaly seemed not to hear his last words. Crushing a handful of his hoary beard in his fist, he smiled broadly.

"Lovely here in the cool, isn't it? I've just remembered something that happened in the old days, lad. One day

before the wheat harvest I put iron rims on the four wheels of a rich man's carriage from Tavria. He came down to collect the wheels on a week-day; it was a day of fast, I remember, either a Wednesday or a Friday. Well, he paid me, praised my work and stood me a drink and called over his men—the ones who'd come to collect the wheels—to have a drink with us. We drank one round. Then I stood a round. And we drank that. He was a Ukrainian, a rich fellow, but for one of his kind he was uncommon good-hearted. And now he thought he'd make a day of it. But it was just my busy time, I had all kinds of orders to deal with. And so I says to him: 'You drink with your men, Trofim Denisovich, but if you don't mind, I'll be excused, I've got a lot of work to do.' And he agreed to that. So they went on with the vodka and I went back to the smithy. There was a roaring in my head, but my feet were firm and there was firmness in my hands, but as a matter of fact, lad, I was rolling drunk. And, as luck would have it, a troika with bells drives up to the smithy. I come out, and there, in a light wicker carriage, under an umbrella was Selivanov, the most famous landowner in our district, a terrible proud man, and the worst bastard the world's ever seen.... His coachman was as white as a sheet and his hands were trembling as he unbuckled the trace from the left-side horse. He'd been careless and the horse had lost a shoe on the road. And now this landowner was pitching into him about it: 'You so and so, I'll fire you, I'll put you in prison, you're making me miss my train,' and so on and so forth. Well, I must tell you, lad, that here on the Don we, Cossacks, never used to knuckle under much to the landowners. And I didn't care a scrap for Selivanov, though he was the richest landlord in the district. And so I came out of the forge, a bit merry after the vodka, and stood at the door listening to him cursing his coachman up hill and down dale. And it really got my

temper up, lad. Selivanov caught sight of me and shouted: 'Hi, blacksmith! Come here!' I wanted to say to him: 'You can come to me if you need me,' but then I had another idea. I went up to him, smiled at him like a brother, held out my hand and said: 'Hullo, old chap! How're you doing?' He was so surprised, his gold specs dropped off his nose. If they hadn't been tied on with a black cord, they'd certainly have got broken! Well, he put his specs back on his nose, and I was still holding my hand out to him; black as soot it was, and dirtier than dirt. So he pretended not to see it, made a face as if he'd swallowed something bitter, and hissed at me through his teeth: 'Are you drunk? Who are you holding your paw out to, you dirty-faced lout?' 'But I know that very well,' I said, 'I know who you are! Why,' I said, 'we're like blood brothers: you keep out of the sun under a sunshade and I keep out of it in my forge, under an earthen roof; I'm a bit drunk on a week-day—you were quite right about that—but I don't suppose you drink only on Sundays, like the working folk, because there's plenty of red in your nose. . . . So both of us must be of noble blood, not like other mortals. Well, if you won't deign to shake hands with me because your hand's white and mine's black, that's a matter for your conscience. When we die we'll both be white as chalk.'

"Selivanov didn't say anything, just bit his lips and kept turning different colours. 'What is it you want?' I ask. 'Your horse shoed? We'll fix that up in a jiffy. But you needn't curse your coachman. He seems to have lost his tongue. You'd better have a go at me. Just come into the forge, old chap; we'll shut the doors tight and then you can try cursing at me. I like people who take risks.'

"Still Selivanov didn't say anything, but his face kept changing colour from one extreme to the other. Now it was white, now it was red, but he didn't say anything.

Well, I shod nis horse and went up to the carriage, but he pretended not to see me and handed a silver ruble to the coachman. 'Give it to that lout,' he says. I took the ruble from the coachman and threw it into the carriage at Selivanov's feet, then I put on a smile of surprise and said: 'What's this, brother, do you expect me to take money from a kinsman for a little thing like that? I'll make you a present of it. You can go to an inn and drink my health!' At that my landowner turned a colour that was neither white nor red, but a kind of purple. 'Your health indeed! You lout, you socialist,' he screamed at me, 'I'll see you dead first. I'll complain to the local ataman! I'll have you rotting in gaol!' "

Davidov gave such a roar of laughter that a flock of sparrows flew off the roof in alarm. Chuckling into his beard, Shaly began to make a cigarette.

"So you didn't hit it off with your 'brother'?" Davidov asked, scarcely able to speak.

"No, I didn't."

"And the money? Did he throw it out of the carriage?"

"I'd have thrown him out. . . . He drove off with his rotten ruble. It wasn't a matter of money. . . ."

"What was it then?"

Davidov laughed so youthfully and infectiously that Shaly became quite merry too. Still chuckling, he waved his hand: "I made a bit of a fool of myself. . . ."

"Go on, Ippolit Sidorovich, what are you dragging it out for?" Davidov looked straight at Shaly with tears in his eyes, but the latter only waved his hand again and, opening wide his bearded mouth, let out thunderous peals of laughter.

"Oh, go on, don't keep me in suspense!" Davidov implored, forgetting for a moment the serious side of their conversation and giving himself up entirely to this spontaneous burst of merriment.

"What is there to tell! . . . You see, lad, he went on calling me a lout and a scoundrel and everything else under the sun, and in the end he nearly choked himself and started stamping on the floor of the carriage. 'You filthy socialist! I'll have you gaoled!' And in those days I didn't know what a socialist was. . . . Revolution—I knew what that meant, but not 'socialist', and I thought it must be the very worst swear-word he could think of. . . . So I answered him: 'You're a socialist yourself, you son-of-a-bitch,' I says. 'Get out of here before I set about you!'"

A fresh fit of laughter laid Davidov flat on his back. Shaly waited until he recovered, then added: "And the next day they had me up before the local ataman. He asked me what had happened, laughed rather like you've been doing and let me off without sentence. He was from a poor family himself and it tickled him to think that an ordinary blacksmith could have made such a fool of a rich landowner. Only before he sent me out, he said: 'You be a little more careful in future, Cossack. Don't wag your tongue too much or in times like these you may be at work in your forge today and tomorrow they'll forge you a set of irons to march to Siberia in. Do you understand?' 'Yes, your honour,' I said. 'Well, off you go, and don't let me see any more of you. And I'll tell Selivanov I flayed the hide off you.' Yes, that was how things used to be, lad. . . ."

Davidov stood up to say good-bye to the talkative blacksmith, but Shaly pulled him down again by his sleeve and asked unexpectedly:

"So you say no one will ever know who killed the Khoprov? That's just where you're mistaken, lad. They'll find out for sure. Just give 'em time."

It seemed as if the old man knew something and Davidov decided to come out into the open.

"Who do you suspect, Ippolit Sidorovich?" he asked directly, glancing keenly into Shaly's black, rather bloodshot, bovine eyes.

Shaly gave him a quick glance and answered evasively: "It's very easy to make a mistake in a matter like this, lad. . . ."

"But all the same?"

Without further hesitation Shaly placed his hand on Davidov's knee and said: "Look here, friend, promise you won't mention me if anything happens. Do you agree?"

"I do."

"Well, Yakov Lukich had a hand in this too. I can tell you that for sure."

"Now look here, brother. . . ." Davidov began disappointedly.

"I was Selivanov's 'brother', but I'm old enough to be your father," Shaly said vexedly. "I'm not saying that Yakov Lukich axed the Khoprovs himself, I'm saying that he had a hand in it; you ought to be able to understand that, lad, if the Lord gave you your fair share of brains."

"What proof have you got?"

"Why, are you aiming at becoming a detective?"

"Now we're on the subject, Ippolit Sidorovich, don't try and get away from it by joking. Tell me everything you know. We haven't time to play blind man's buff together."

"You'd make a poor detective," Shaly declared with conviction. "Don't hurry me, damn you, and I'll tell you everything, everything down to the last detail, then you'll be in a hurry rubbing your eyes. You know, there was no need at all for you to get yourself mixed up with Lushka. What use is she to you? Couldn't you find a better woman than that bitch?"

"That's none of your business," Davidov snapped.

"Yes, lad, it's not only my business, it's the business of the whole collective farm."

"Now what are you driving at?"

"Because since you've got mixed up with this camp-following bitch you've started working badly. You've got an attack of night-blindness.... And you say it's not my business. It isn't just your misfortune, lad, it's the whole farm's. I suppose you think your carryings-on with Lushka are all under cover, but the village knows everything there is to be known about you. Why, we, old men, sometimes get together and have a chat among ourselves about how to get you away from that Lushka, plague the woman! And why? Because women like Lushka don't encourage men to work, they drag them away from it. That's why we're worried about you.... You're a good lad, you're steady, you don't drink, in a word you're not very wild. And that Lushka, the bitch, has taken advantage of it. She's got on your back and she's driving you. You know yourself what she's driving you with, lad, and what's more she's showing off, as much as to say: 'Look who I've got hold of!' Eh, Davidov, Davidov, you've found the wrong woman.... One Sunday we, old men, were sitting outside Beskhlebnov's cottage and you went past. Old man Beskhlebnov looks after you and says: 'We ought to have tried out our Davidov on the scales to see how much he weighed before he knew Lushka and how much he does now. I reckon she's shaken a good half of the weight out of him, sifted it away, she has. That won't do, men; it's no good her getting the sifted flour and us getting the bran....' Believe me, lad, when I heard that I felt ashamed for you! Downright ashamed! If you'd been my mate in the forge, nobody in the village would have raised a murmur, but you're head of our whole household. And to be head is a great thing, lad. It wasn't for nothing at the meetings in the old days

that they used to say, when a Cossack was thrashed for doing something wrong: 'Let his arse be red, so long as he's clear in the head.' But the head of our collective farm is not so very clear, he's a bit fuddled. He's rubbed himself against Lushka and got smeared with tar.... Had you taken up with a decent girl, or widow, say, nobody would have had a word against you, but you.... Eh, Davidov, Davidov, you've got your eyes bunged up! And what I reckon is that it's not Lushka's love that's made you thin, but your conscience. It's your conscience that's killing you, I can tell you that for sure."

Davidov gazed at the road outside the smitny where the sparrows were bathing in the dust. A visible pallor had crept over his face, and bluish spots showed on his peeling cheek-bones.

"All right, you can leave out the rest," he muttered and turned towards Shaly. "I feel sick enough without your telling me about it!"

"Well, when a man's sick after a hang-over, he usually feels better," Shaly said almost casually.

When he had recovered a little from his discomfort and embarrassment, Davidov said drily: "You give me proof that Ostrovnov took part in that affair. Without facts and proof it sounds like slander. Ostrovnov has wronged you and now you're getting your own back on him. That's a fact! Well, what proof have you got? Speak up!"

"You're talking through your hat, lad," Shaly replied severely. "What could I hold against Yakov Lukich? That matter of pay? But I'll get what's due to me all the same. And I haven't got any proof, I wasn't lying under Khoprov's bed when they killed him and his wife, my cousin...."

There was a rustle on the other side of the wall, and with unexpected agility the old man raised his burly

body from the ground. For a minute he stood listening intently, then in a casual manner he pulled off his soiled leather apron and said: "Look here, lad, come over to my place, we'll drink a mug of cold milk there, in the cool, and then we'll finish our chat. I'll tell you in confidence..." He leaned over to Davidov. His resounding whisper could have been heard in the neighbouring cottage yards. "That little devil of mine must be eavesdropping... He's a peg for any hole and you can never talk to anyone without him listening in. Lord, the amount of tyranny I've had to put up with from him—there's no end to it! He won't do what he's told, he's lazy, he's spoiled to the core, but he'll make a blacksmith, that's certain! He can do anything he puts his hand to, the little imp! And besides he's an orphan. That's why I put up with his tyranny, I want to make a man of him, a good smith."

Shaly went into the forge, tossed his apron on to a soot-blackened bench, uttered a brief "Come on!" to Davidov and strode off in the direction of his cottage.

Davidov would have liked to be left alone in order to think over everything that he had heard from Shaly, but their conversation about the murder of the Khoprov was not finished, so he followed the smith as he lumbered off like a bear down the village street. It seemed awkward to Davidov to keep silent all the way and he asked: "What kind of a family have you got, Ippolit Sidorovich?"

"The old woman and myself, that's all my family."

"Any children?"

"When we were young we had two, but they never took to this world. The third one was still-born, and since then the wife hasn't had any more. She was young and healthy, but something went wrong with her and—that was that! No matter what we did

or tried, it was no good. In those days the wife went on foot to the monastery at Kiev, to pray for a child, but that didn't help either. Before she left I told her: 'You might at least bring me back a little Ukrainian.' "

Shaly gave a little smirk and concluded: "She called me a wicked fool, prayed to the icon and set off. She was gone from spring to autumn, but all to no purpose. And since then I've been taking in various orphans to teach them the blacksmith's trade. I'm rare fond of kiddies, but the Lord never granted us that joy. It's like that sometimes, lad. . . ."

The neat parlour was quiet and cool in the semi-darkness. Yellow sunlight filtered through a chink between the closed shutters. From the recently washed floor there rose a smell of wild thyme and, more faintly, of wormwood. Shaly himself brought up from the cellar a cool damp jar of milk, set out two mugs on the table, and sighed.

"The missus has gone off to the vegetable-garden; the heat don't worry her, the old dragon. . . . So you ask me what proof I've got. Now I'll tell you this for sure. The morning the Khoprovs were killed I went to have a look at the bodies; after all, his wife had been my cousin. But no one was allowed in the cottage, and there was a militiaman at the door waiting for the investigator to arrive. So I stood by the porch. . . . And as I was looking round I noticed a footprint on the steps that I'd seen before somewhere. . . . The steps were all trampled on, but there was just this one footprint at the side by the rail."

"What made you think you'd seen it before?" Davidov asked quickly.

"The tip on the heel. It was a fresh footprint of the night before, and the shape was familiar. . . . There was nobody in the whole village who wore tips like them,

except for one man. And I couldn't be mistaken, because they were my tips."

Davidov put down the unfinished mug of milk on the table impatiently.

"I don't follow you. Make yourself clear."

"It's easy enough, lad. Two years ago, before we had the collective farm, in early spring, Yakov Lukich dropped in at the forge and asked me to put some iron rims on the wheels of his trap. 'Bring it along,' I says, 'while I haven't got much to do.' So he brought it down and stayed for half an hour talking about this and that. And when he got up to go, he starts poking in a lot of old iron I'd piled up by the furnace. He found two old heel tips, the sort that go right round the heel, from a pair of English boots—I'd had 'em since the Civil War. 'I'll take this pair of tips off you, Sidorovich,' he says. 'They'll do for my boots. I seem to be getting old and walking heavy, my heels always need mending.' 'Take 'em,' I says, 'you should never grudge old junk to a good fellow, as they say. They're steel; you'll never wear 'em out, if you don't lose 'em.' He put them into his pocket and went away. Of course, he's forgotten about that long ago but I remembered it. And it was the mark of those tips that I had noticed on the step.... Somehow it made me suspicious. How did that foot-print get there, I wondered."

"Well, go on," said Davidov impatiently.

"So I thought, suppose I go and look up Lukich and see what sort of mark he makes with his boots? I looked him out specially and pretended I wanted to see him about some iron for the ploughshares. Then I looked at his feet... he was wearing felt boots! The frosts were still on then. So I just asks him off-hand like: 'Seen the murdered victims, Lukich?' 'No,' he says, 'I can't bear the sight of dead bodies, specially when it's a murder. I'm too chicken-hearted. But I think I'll have

to go there.' And while we were talking about something else I asks off-hand again: 'Is it long since you saw the dead man?' 'Yes,' he says, 'quite a long time, hadn't seen him since last week. Just think what scoundrels we've got living among us! Killed a fine chap like Khoprov, and no one knows what for. He was a quiet fellow, never harmed anyone in his life. May their arms rot, the devils!'

"And you know, that burned me like fire! There he was, talking like Judas, and my knees were fair knocking together. You were there yourself last night, you bastard, I thought. And if you didn't murder Khoprov yourself, you must have taken someone with you who did. But I didn't show anything, and that's how we parted. But the idea of testing his footprints stuck in my head, like a stone in a horseshoe. Had he lost the irons off his boots or not? For about two weeks I waited for him to leave off his felt boots and put on his ordinary pair. At last there was a bit of a thaw, the snow melted and I left my work in the forge and went on purpose to the office. Lukich was there and wearing boots! Presently he went out in the yard. I followed him. He turned off the path and walked over to the shed. I looked at his footprints and they had been made by my tips. Those tips hadn't come off in two years!"

"Why didn't you say anything at the time, confound you? Why didn't you report it?" The blood had rushed to Davidov's cheeks. He thumped the table in annoyance.

But Shaly surveyed him with a not very affectionate glance and asked: "Are you looking for a bigger fool than yourself, lad? I thought of that before you. . . . Suppose I reported to the investigator three weeks after the murder, how would he find the boot-mark on the steps? I'd just have looked a fool."

"You ought to have spoken the same day! You're just a rotten coward, you were afraid of Ostrovnov, and that's a fact!"

"There's something in that," Shaly agreed amicably. "It's a risky business to fall out with Ostrovnov.... About ten years ago, when he was younger, he had a quarrel with Antip Grach at the mowing. They fought it out and Antip gave him a good pasting. And a month later Antip's kitchen-shed caught fire. The shed stood close to the house and the wind was in the right direction, so the house caught too. The cattle-shed went up in the blaze and so did the barns. Antip used to have a proper house with outbuildings and now he's living in a shack. That's what it means to get on the wrong side of Lukich. He doesn't even forgive old grudges, not to mention fresh ones. But that's not the point, lad. I didn't want to tell the militiaman at once of my suspicions. In the first place I was a bit scared, and then I couldn't be sure that only Yakov Lukich was wearing that kind of heel tips. I had to check up. During the Civil War half the village was wearing English boots. And an hour later Khoprovs' steps must have been so dirty and trampled that you couldn't tell a camel's hoof-mark from a horse's. So that's how it was, lad. Not so very simple when you come to think it all over. And I didn't ask you round just to have a look at those mowing-machines. I wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with you."

"You've made up your mind too late, you slow thinker," Davidov said reproachfully.

"It's not too late yet, but if you don't take the blinkers off your eyes soon, it will be too late, and I'm telling you that for sure."

Davidov hesitated for a moment, then replied, choosing his words carefully.

"About me, Ippolit Sidorovich, about my work you've said a lot that's quite true, and I want to thank you for it. I've got to reorganise my work, and that's a fact! But it's the devil of a job to know everything when you're new to it!"

"That's true," Shaly assented.

"Well, and we'll look into the question of rates for your work and put that right. As we didn't catch Ostrov-nov in the act, we'll have to keep an eye on him for a bit. We need time. But not a word to anyone about our conversation. Do you hear?"

"I'll keep silent as the grave!" Shaly assured him.

"Perhaps you've got something else to say? If not, I must get down to the school, I've got to see the head-master about something."

"Yes, I have, and I'll say it. Give up Lushka! She'll get you into trouble, lad. . . ."

"Oh, to hell with you!" Davidov exclaimed bitterly. "We've spoken about her and that's enough. I thought you'd have something worthwhile to say to finish up with, and you start that again. . . ."

"Don't get excited, lad, you listen to an old man properly. I won't tell you wrong and you might as well know that lately she's been going about with someone else besides you. . . . And if you don't want a bullet in your head you'd better have done with the bitch for good!"

"Who might I get a bullet in my head from?"

The faint smile of distrust scarcely touched Davidov's firm lips, but Shaly noticed it and was furious.

"What are you grinning at? You'd better thank God that you're still alive, you blind man! I can't make it out why he fired at Makar and not at you."

"Who's 'he'?"

"Timofei the Torn, that's who! Why the hell he picked on Makar, I can't think. That's why I asked you

over, to warn you. And you grin at me worse than my Vanya."

Involuntarily Davidov thrust his hand into his pocket and leaned across the table.

"Timofei? Where did he come from?"

"He's escaped, how else could he get here?"

"Have you seen him?" Davidov asked quietly, his voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Is today Wednesday?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was last Saturday night I saw him and your Lushka together. Our cow didn't come back with the herd, so I went to look for her, the old hag. When I was bringing her back about midnight, I bumped into them near the village."

"You didn't make a mistake?"

"Do you think I took you for Timofei?" Shaly snorted scornfully. "No, lad, I may be old, but my eyes are sharp. They thought it was only a cow and they didn't notice me behind the cow. Lushka says: 'Drat the beast, it's only a cow, Timofei; I thought it was a man.' And then I came into the open. She jumped up first and Timofei after her. I heard the bolt of his gun click, but he didn't say anything. So I just said calmly: 'It's all right, kind folk. Don't let me disturb you. I'm just bringing in my cow, she strayed from the herd.'"

"Well, that makes everything clear," Davidov said more to himself than to Shaly, and rose heavily to his feet. He put his left arm round the smith's shoulders and squeezed his elbow with his right. "Thanks for everything, dear Ippolit Sidorovich!"

In the evening he told Nagulnov and Razmyotnov of his conversation with Shaly and suggested reporting at once to the district GPU that Timofei the Torn had appeared in the village, but Nagulnov, who had received the news with splendid calm, replied:

"There's no need to report anywhere. They'll only wreck everything. Timofei's not a fool and he won't be living in the village, but as soon as one of those GPU men shows up here, he'll find out at once and take to his heels."

"How will he find out if they come here secretly, at night?" Razmyotnov asked.

Nagulnov eyed him with good-natured scorn.

"You've got a child's mind, Andrei. The wolf always sees the hunter first."

"Well, what do you suggest?" Davidov asked.

"Give me five or six days and I'll present you with Timofei alive or dead. You and Andrei had better be careful. Don't go out late at night and don't put on your lights. You can leave the rest to me."

Nagulnov flatly refused to go into detail about his plans.

"Well, carry on," Davidov consented. "But be careful—if you put Timofei on his guard he'll make off somewhere and we'll never find him."

"Don't worry, he won't get away," Nagulnov assured them quietly and, lowering his dark lids, quenched the sudden gleam that for a second had appeared in his eyes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lushka was still living with her aunt. The little rush-roofed cottage with its sagging yellow shutters and walls that were sunken and crooked with age, clung to the very edge of a cliff above the river. The small yard was overgrown with grass and weeds. Alexeyevna, Lushka's aunt, had nothing but a cow and a little kitchen-garden to look after. In the low wattle fence that bordered the yard on the river side there was a

stile which the old mistress of the house used when going to fetch water for the cabbages, cucumbers, and tomatoes that grew in her garden.

Round the stile, purple and violet spurs of thistle rose proudly from a tangle of wild hemp; pumpkin trailers weaved between the stakes of the fence, patterning it with yellow bells; in the morning the fence sparkled with the blue splashes of opening convolvulus flowers, and from a distance it looked like an intricately woven carpet. It was an out-of-the-way spot and it caught Nagulnov's eye the following morning as he walked along the bank of the river past Alexeyevna's yard.

For two days, while waiting for his cold to pass he did nothing, but on the third, as soon as it grew dark, he put on a wadded jacket, left the house stealthily and went down to the river. All through the black, moonless night he lay in the wild hemp by the fence, but no one appeared at the stile. At dawn Makar went home, slept for a few hours, spent the day with the first team, which had just begun mowing, and with the coming of darkness again took up his position by the stile.

At midnight the door of the cottage creaked faintly. Through the fence Makar saw the dark figure of a woman muffled in a shawl appear in the porch. It was Lushka.

She came slowly down the steps, halted for a moment, then walked out of the yard and down the street. Makar followed her noiselessly at a distance of ten paces. Suspecting nothing and without even a backward glance, Lushka walked towards the common. They had already left the village, when that confounded cold of Makar's let him down. He sneezed loudly and at once threw himself flat. Lushka whirled round. For a minute she stood motionless, rooted to the spot, clasping her hands to her breast, breathing fast and hard. Her bod-

ice had suddenly grown tight and the blood hammered at her temples. At last, overcoming her confusion, she edged timidly towards Makar. He lay resting on his elbows, watching her from under lowered brows. Lushka halted.

"Who's that?" she asked in a stifled voice.

Makar, who was by this time kneeling on all fours, drew the flap of his jacket silently over his head. He had no desire to be recognised.

"Heavens!" Lushka exclaimed in a frightened whisper and dashed away to the village.

Before daybreak Makar woke up Razmyotnov and said gloomily sitting down on a bench: "Sneezed once and ruined the whole show! . . . Give me a hand, Andrei, or we'll miss Timofei!"

Half an hour later they drove up to Alexeyevna's cottage in a two-horse cart. Razmyotnov tethered the horses to the fence and was the first to mount the porch and knock on the crooked door.

"Who's there?" the mistress asked in a sleepy voice. "Who do you want?"

"Get up, Alexeyevna, or you'll be too late for milking," Razmyotnov answered cheerfully.

"Who's that?"

"It's me, the chairman of the Soviet, Razmyotnov."

"What brings you here at this hour of the night?" the woman responded ill-humouredly.

"Something to see you about, open up."

The latch clicked, and Razmyotnov and Nagulnov entered the kitchen. The mistress of the house hurried into her clothes and lighted the lamp.

"Is your lodger in?" Razmyotnov indicated the door of the parlour with his eyes.

"Yes, she's in. What would you be wanting of her so early?"

Without answering, Razmyotnov knocked on the door and said loudly: "Hi, Lushka! Get up and get dressed. I give you five minutes to put your things on, like in the army!"

Lushka appeared barefoot, with a shawl over her naked shoulders. Her smooth brown calves showed up the pure white of her lace-trimmed underskirt.

"Get dressed," Razmyotnov ordered. And shook his head reproachfully: "You might have put on a skirt. . . . Lor', you're a shameless hussy!"

Lushka surveyed the visitors with an intent and inquiring glance, then gave them a dazzling smile:

"But we're all kith and kin here, why should I be shy?"

Though only half awake, she was girlishly fresh and attractive, that cursed Lushka! Smiling and making no attempt to hide his delight, Razmyotnov admired her in silence. Makar stared at the old mistress of the house, who had retired to the stove, with a heavy unblinking gaze.

"What can I do for you, my dear guests?" Lushka asked, adjusting her shawl with a coquettish movement of the shoulders. "You aren't looking for Davidov by any chance, are you?"

She was now smiling arrogantly, and her bold, gleaming eyes had narrowed in triumph to meet the glance of her former husband. But turning his face, Makar regarded her with heavy calm, and with the same heavy calm in his voice, replied: "No, we're not looking for Davidov here, we're looking for Timofei."

"This is not the place to look for him," Lushka said carelessly, but her shoulders quivered for a moment, as if from cold. "You'd better look for my handsome darling in Siberia, where you sent him. . . ."

"Drop the acting," Makar said still as calmly, without losing his control.

His cool restraint was such a surprise to Lushka that she lost her temper and went over to the attack.

"Was it you, dear husband, who trod on my heels last night when I was walking out of the village?"

"So you did recognise me?" A faint sneer grazed Makar's lips.

"No, I didn't in the dark, and you frightened me to death, my sweet! I guessed it was you afterwards, when I got back to the village."

"What were you scared of, a brazen bitch like you?" Razmyotnov asked roughly, striving to break the spell of Lushka's challenging beauty with deliberate rudeness.

She planted her hands on her hips and gave him a withering look.

"Don't you bitch me! Go and call your Marina names like that, maybe Demid the Silent will give you something to remember him by. It's easy to call me names, I haven't anyone here to stick up for me. . . ."

"You've got more than you need," Razmyotnov said shortly

But Lushka, no longer paying the slightest attention to him, was addressing Makar.

"Why did you follow me? What did you want? I'm free as a bird, I can go where I like. And if my boyfriend Davidov had been with me, he wouldn't have thanked you for dogging our footsteps!"

The muscles under Makar's pale cheeks bunched sharply, but with a tremendous effort of will he controlled himself and said nothing. His knuckles cracked audibly as he clenched his fists. Razmyotnov hastened to cut short the conversation, which was beginning to take a dangerous turn.

"Well, we've had enough talking! Get dressed, Lushka, and you, Alexeyevna. You're both under arrest, and we're taking you to district headquarters."

"What's this for?" Lushka asked.

"You'll find out when you get there."

"And if I refuse?"

"We'll truss you up like a sheep and take you there. And you won't kick either. Hurry up."

For a few seconds Lushka hesitated, then backed away, slipped nimbly through the door, shut it behind her and tried to put on the catch. But Makar stepped forward in time and without much effort pulled the door open, went into the room and, raising his voice, said:

"We're not here for fun! Get dressed and don't think of running away. I shan't run after you, but a bullet will, you little fool. Understand?"

Lushka sat down on her crumpled bed breathing heavily.

"Go outside, I'm going to get dressed."

"Get dressed. You needn't be bashful. I've seen you all ways."

"Oh, to hell with you," Lushka said wearily and without anger.

She threw off her night-dress and underskirt. Naked and radiant in her compact, youthful beauty, she walked unembarrassedly to the chest and opened it. Makar did not look at her; his indifferent gaze was fixed on the window.

Five minutes later Lushka, dressed in a modest cotton frock, said: "I'm ready, Makar dear," and looked up at Makar with resignation and a trace of sadness in her eyes.

Alexeyevna, dressed already, was asking in the kitchen: "But who'll look after the house? Who'll milk the cow and see to the garden?"

"We'll look after that, auntie. Everything will be just as it is now when you come back," Razmyotnov assured her.

They went out into the yard and got into the cart. Razmyotnov picked up the reins, cracked his whip furiously and started the horses at a fast trot. Outside the village Soviet he stopped the cart and jumped down.

"Off you get, girls!" He led the way into the building, lighted a match and opened the door of a dark store-room. "Go inside and make yourselves comfortable."

Lushka asked: "When do we go to the militia?"

"We'll go when it gets light."

"Then why did you drive us here instead of letting us walk?" Lushka insisted.

"Thought we'd do it in style." Razmyotnov grinned in the darkness.

He could scarcely have explained to the curious women that he had driven them to the village Soviet because he did not want anyone to see them.

"We could have walked this distance," Alexeyevna said, crossing herself as she stepped into the room.

Lushka followed her with a suppressed sigh. Razmyotnov locked the door, and only then said loudly "Listen, Lushka, we'll give you food and water, and there's a bucket in the corner if you need it. I'll ask you to sit quiet and not start shouting and knocking on the door, or, honest to God, we'll tie you up and stop your mouths. This is a serious business. Well, so long! I'll come and see you in the morning."

He put a second padlock on the main door of the building, and there was pleading in his voice as he said to Nagulnov, who was waiting for him on the steps: "I'll keep them here for three days, but not more. Say what you like, Makar, but if Davidov gets to know about this, we'll be in a hell of a mess!"

"He won't know. Put the horses away, then take the temporary prisoners something to eat. Well, thanks, I'm going home. . . ."

But it was not the former gallant and upright Makar Nagulnov who walked back through the deserted streets of Gremyachy Log in the blue darkness of early dawn. His shoulders drooped and he walked slowly, with hanging head, from time to time pressing his big broad hand to the left side of his chest.

In order to avoid Davidov's eye, Nagulnov spent his days with the mowers in the fields and returned to the village only at nightfall. On the evening of the second day, before going to his ambush, he called on Razmyotnov and asked: "Davidov hasn't been looking for me, has he?"

"No, I've hardly seen anything of him myself. We've been putting a bridge across the river, and what with going down to the bridge and running back to see our prisoners, I've had no time at all."

"How are they getting on?"

"Yesterday afternoon Lushka got into a terrible rage! Every time I went to the door she had a new name for me. That damn woman swears harder than a drunken Cossack! Where she learned it all I don't know! I could hardly get her to calm down. She's quiet now. Crying."

"Let her cry. She'll soon be wailing for her dead lover."

"Timofei won't show up," Razmyotnov said doubtfully.

"He will!" Nagulnov struck his knee with his fist and a gleam appeared in his heavy-lidded eyes. "How can he get along without Lushka? He'll come!"

And Timofei came. At about two in the morning on the third day, forgetting caution, he appeared at the stile. Was it jealousy that drew him to the village? Or hunger? Perhaps it was both; the strain was too much and he came.

Noiseless as an animal, he crept along the path from the river. Makar heard neither the scrape of clay under his feet nor the rustle of dry weeds, and when the silhouette of a man leaning slightly forward appeared within five paces of him, he started in surprise.

Timofei stood motionless with a rifle in his right hand and listened intently. Makar lay in the wild hemp, holding his breath. For a second his heart faltered, then beat steadily again, but there was a dry bitter taste in his mouth.

A landrail cried hoarsely from the river. A cow lowed at the other end of the village. Somewhere in the waterside meadow by the river a quail spilled out its resounding trill.

Makar had a perfect target. Timofei stood with his left side conveniently exposed, still listening alertly.

Makar quietly placed the barrel of his revolver on his crooked left arm. The sleeve of his jacket was wet with dew. For a second Makar hesitated. No, Makar Nagulnov was no kulak swine who would shoot an enemy in the back. Without changing his position he said loudly:

"Turn round and face death, you snake!"

As if tossed up by a spring-board, Timofei leapt forward and to one side, bringing up his rifle. But Makar was too quick for him. In the damp stillness the revolver shot was muffled and not very loud.

Dropping his rifle and crumpling at the knees, Timofei slowly, or so it seemed to Makar, fell backwards. Makar heard the dull thud of his head on the well-trodden path.

For another fifteen minutes Makar lay without moving. Men don't go in a crowd to visit one woman, he thought, but maybe there are some of his friends in hiding by the river, waiting for him? He strained his ears to the utmost. But there was absolute stillness

all round. The landrail, which had fallen silent after the shot, struck up again timidly. Day was approaching swiftly. A purple band was spreading along the eastern edge of the dark-blue sky. The clumps of the willows on the other side of the river were already clearly outlined. Makar rose and went up to Timofei. He was lying on his back, his right arm outstretched. The dead, fixed eyes, in which there was still a natural brightness, were wide open. They seemed to gaze in delighted and silent wonder at the dimmed and fading stars, at a small opal cloud melting in the zenith with a few threads of silver underneath, at the whole boundless expanse of the heavens in its transparent, gossamer-fine veil of mist.

Makar touched the dead man with the toe of his boot and said quietly: "So your roving days are over, curse you!"

Even in death he was handsome, this women's darling. A dark lock of hair had fallen on the clear white forehead that the sun had never touched, the full face had not yet lost its faint rosiness, the curling upper lip with its soft black moustache was raised a little, exposing moist teeth, and a faint shadow of a surprised smile lingered in the blooming lips that only a few days ago had kissed Lushka so avidly. Seem to have been eating well, lad! Makar thought.

As he calmly surveyed the body of the dead man, Makar felt neither his recent anger, nor satisfaction, only a crushing weariness. Everything that had moved him through long weeks and years, everything that had once sent the warm blood rushing to his heart and made it contract with bitterness, jealousy, and pain—all that had passed away with Timofei's death, never to return.

He picked up the rifle and, frowning with distaste, searched the dead man's pockets. In the left-hand pocket of the jacket he felt the ribbed oval shape of

a grenade, in the right, except for four clips of rifle cartridges, there was nothing. Timofei had no papers.

Before he turned away, Makar glanced at the dead man for the last time, and only then did he notice that the embroidered shirt he wore had been freshly washed, and the khaki breeches darned neatly at the knees, evidently by a woman's hand. So she did you proud, Makar thought bitterly, lifting his leg heavily, very heavily, over the stile.

Despite the early hour Razmyotnov met Makar at his gate, took the rifle, cartridges and grenade from his hands, and said with satisfaction:

"So you got him? Well, he was always a daredevil, never minded the risk. . . . I heard your shot, so I got up and dressed. I was just going to run down, but I saw you coming. Well, that's a relief."

"Give me the keys of the village Soviet," Makar said.

Realising what he meant, Razmyotnov could not help asking: "Want to let Lushka out?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't!"

"Shut up!" Makar said hoarsely. "I still love her, the bitch. . . ."

He took the keys and, turning silently, shuffled off to the village Soviet.

In the dark passage Makar had difficulty in finding the lock. At last he flung open the door of the store-room and called quietly: "Lushka! Come outside a minute."

There was a rustle of straw in the corner. Without a word Lushka appeared on the threshold, casually adjusting the white kerchief on her head.

"Go out on the steps." Makar stood aside to let her pass. In the porch Lushka leaned silently against the rail. Was it support she needed? Like Andrei Razmyot-

nov she had not slept all night and had heard the faint sound of the shot at dawn. She probably guessed what Makar was about to tell her. Her face was pale, but her dry eyes in their dark sockets held a new expression that Makar had never seen before.

"I have killed Timofei," Makar said, staring straight into her black tormented eyes and involuntarily letting his gaze wander to the bitter lines that had firmly established themselves at the corners of that capricious, sensuous mouth. "Go straight home, put your things together in a bundle and get out of this village for ever, otherwise it'll be the worse for you. . . . You'll be tried."

Lushka did not speak. Makar fumbled awkwardly in his pockets. Then he held out a crumpled lace handkerchief that was now grey with dirt.

"It's yours. You left it behind when you went away. . . . Take it, I don't need it now."

With cold fingers Lushka pushed the handkerchief into the sleeve of her crumpled dress. Makar drew a deep breath and said: "If you want to see him, he's lying outside your yard, by the stile."

They parted in silence, never to see one another again. As he walked down the steps of the porch, Makar nodded a careless farewell. Lushka watched him go, then bowed her proud head. Perhaps at this last meeting she saw someone different in that stern and rather lonely man. Who knows?

CHAPTER TWELVE

The fine hot days speeded the ripening of the grass in the dry valleys, and at length the third and last team of the Gremyachy collective farm joined in the steppe haymaking. The mowers drove out into the steppe on Friday morning, and on Saturday evening Nagulnov

called at Davidov's lodgings. He sat for some time without speaking; stooped and unshaven, he seemed to have aged in the past few days. In the dark stubble on his jutting chin Davidov noticed for the first time a frosty gleam of grey.

For about ten minutes the host and his guest smoked in silence. Neither of them uttered a word, for neither wished to be the first to begin the conversation. However, when it was almost time for him to go, Nagulnov said:

"Looks as if all Lyubishkin's team has gone out to mow. Have you checked?"

"The ones who were put on the job have gone. What about it?"

"You'd better go out tomorrow morning and see how they're getting on."

"Checking up when they've hardly got there? Isn't it a bit too early?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"Well?"

A suspicion of a sneer showed at the corners of Nagulnov's dry lips.

"His team are nearly all believers, addicted to the opium of the church, particularly the ones in skirts. They're out in the steppe, I know, but they won't do any mowing on a church holiday, I'll be damned if they will! And what's more, you'll have some of those women going off to church in Tubyanskoy. And we're short of time, you know. If the weather lets us down as well, the hay we get will only be fit for the dogs to lie on."

"All right, I'll go out first thing in the morning. There'll be no slipping away while I'm there. Thanks for warning me. But why is it only Lyubishkin's team that are nearly all believers, as you say?"

"They're plentiful enough in the other teams, but they sprout thicker in the third."

"I see. And what will you be doing tomorrow? What about going out to the first team?"

Nagulnov was slow in answering. "I'm not going anywhere, I'll have a few days at home. I'm feeling sort of groggy ... as if I'd been through a threshing mill."

The Gremyachy Party group had made it a rule among themselves that when there was field work to be done every Communist had to be in the fields, too. They usually went out long before receiving any instructions from the district committee. And now, too, Nagulnov's presence in one of the teams was essential. But Davidov fully understood his friend's state of mind, and so he said: "All right, stay at home, Makar. It'll probably be better that way. We've got to have someone with authority in the village in case something crops up."

Davidov added the last sentence only because he had no wish to display his sympathy to Makar openly. And Makar—as if this was all he had come for—went out without a word.

But a minute later he was back in the room, and with an apologetic little laugh said: "My memory's like a pocket with a hole in it these days. I even forgot to say good-bye to you. When you get back, drop in and tell me how the true believers are getting on, and what they're looking at most—their horses' hoofs or the cross on Tubyanskoy church. You just tell those christened crap-swallowers that Christ only dropped his manna during the famine for the folk of olden days, and he only did it once in a lifetime. Tell 'em he won't lay in a winter's hay for the Cossacks, so they'd better not count on him! In other words, use your anti-religious propaganda on 'em full blast! But you know yourself what to say in such cases. It's a pity I'm not going with you, I could have given you a lot of help with the

anti-religion stuff. Maybe I'm not such a powerful orator, but my fist, mate, comes in useful for any discussion! Just one good sock on the jaw and the other bloke can't do any more arguing, because it's all right to argue standing up, but how can he argue if he's lying down? We don't take any notice of lying-down arguments!"

Nagulnov suddenly livened up and with a more cheerful gleam in his eye suggested: "Suppose I come with you? Eh, Semyon? You never know, you might get into trouble with the women over some religious misunderstanding, and I might come in very useful. You know our women. They didn't quite peck you to death back in the spring, but they'll do it next time for sure. You'd be all right with me there! I know how to deal with that devil's tribe."

Davidov, who had been fighting back his laughter, waved his arms in fright: "No! Don't think of it! I don't need any of your help, I'll manage myself. You may be worrying over nothing, you know. The people have become much more politically conscious than they were in the first months of collectivisation, that's a fact! And you still measure everything by the same old yardstick, Makar, that's also a fact!"

"Well, it's up to you, I need not go. I thought I might be of use to you, but if you're such a great hero, do the job yourself."

"Don't get your back up, Makar," Davidov said mildly. "But you make a bad fighter against religious prejudice, and you can do a lot of harm, a terrific lot of harm!"

"I've no wish to argue with you about that," Nagulnov replied drily. "Just mind you don't trip up! You've got into the habit of sucking up to those property-owners of yesterday, but I treat them as my partisan conscience dictates. Well, I'm off. Good luck to you!"

They shook hands with a manly firmness, as though in long farewell. Nagulnov's hand was as hard and cold as stone, his eyes had lost their recent lively gleam and the concealed, unspoken pain had reappeared. He's having a hard time, Davidov reflected, checking an unbidden impulse of sympathy.

With his hand on the door-handle Nagulnov half-turned towards Davidov, looking not at him but into the other corner of the room, and when he spoke there was a slight huskiness in his voice: "The woman who used to be my wife and your girl-friend has left the village. Did you know that?"

The astonished Davidov, who had not yet learned that Lushka had some days ago said good-bye for ever to Gremyachy Log and all the places she loved and remembered, said with conviction: "That's not true! How could she, without any papers? She must be living with her aunt, waiting for the talk about Timofei to die down. She must find it a bit awkward to appear in public just now. It turned out badly for her with Timofei."

Makar sniffed. He wanted to say: "Did it turn out any better for her with us?" but he said something else: "She has got her passport, and she left the village on Wednesday. You can take that from me. I saw her myself setting out at dawn. She'd got a little bundle in her hand—her clothes, I suppose—and she stood for a bit on the hill looking back at the village, then off she went, the witch! I questioned her aunt to find out where she was making for. But her aunt doesn't know a thing. I'll see when I get there was all she told her. That's the way she's always lived, the trollopy bitch."

Davidov did not reply. The old feeling of guilt and embarrassment towards Makar had gripped him with renewed force. Staring past Makar and trying to appear

indifferent, he said quietly: "Well, good riddance! No one will be sorry for her."

"She never needed anybody's sympathy in her life. But in this business of love, mate, Timofei had us beaten into a cocked hat. And that's a fact, to use your manner of speaking! What are you pulling faces for? You don't like it? Well, neither do I, mate. But what can you do if it's the truth? Lukeriya just wasn't made for the likes of you or me. And why? Because that's the kind of woman she was—a devil, not a woman! Do you think she cared about the world revolution? Catch her caring about anything. She didn't give a rap for the collective farms, or the state farms, or Soviet power either! All she wanted was to fool around with the men and do as little work as possible, that was the whole extent of her non-Party programme. Why, to keep a woman like that, you'd have to smear your hands with resin, get a good hold on her skirt, shut your eyes tight and forget everything else in the world. But even then I reckon if you dozed off for a minute, she'd creep out of her skirt like a snake does out of its skin and be off kicking her heels on the village green in her birthday suit. That's the kind of woman she was, that cussed and thrice-cussed Luke-riya! And that's why she took such a fancy to Timofei. There were times when Timofei would be strolling round the village all the week with his accordion. He'd got past our house and Lushka would be all in a fever, just couldn't wait for me to get out of the house, the poor thing. Now, how could you or I keep a four-footed flirt like that? Were we to chuck up the revolution and all our everyday Soviet work just for her sake? And club up to buy an accordion? We'd be done for! Done for and degenerate as any bourgeois! No, let her go hang herself on the first branch she comes to, it's not

for me or you, Semyon, to betray our Party spirit for the sake of a worthless slut like her!"

Nagulnov's liveliness returned and he straightened his shoulders. A flush appeared in his cheeks. He leaned back against the door-post, rolled a cigarette, lighted it and after two or three deep pulls began to talk in a calmer and quieter tone, sometimes dropping his voice to a whisper.

"To tell you the truth, Semyon, I was afraid my ex-wife would start wailing when she saw Timofei dead. . . . Not a bit of it! Her aunt says she went up to him without a tear in her eye, kneeled down beside him and said very quiet: 'You flew to me, my falcon, but you flew to your death. . . . Forgive me for not being able to save you.' Then she slipped off her kerchief, took the comb out of her hair, put Timofei's forelock straight, kissed him on the lips and walked away. Just walked away and never looked back once!"

After a brief pause Makar spoke again, louder now, and in his husky voice Davidov was surprised to detect an ill-concealed note of pride.

"And that was all her farewell. Wasn't that finè, eh? She's got a heart of oak, that cursed woman has! Well, I'm off. All the best!"

So that was what Makar had come for. . . . Davidov saw him to the gate, then went back to his room and threw himself down on the bed without undressing. He wanted to remember nothing and think of nothing and forget himself in sleep as quickly as possible. But sleep would not come.

Again and again he cursed himself for his rashness, his folly, in forming that unwise connection with Lushka. There had not been a scrap of love between them. And then Timofei had turned up and without a second thought Lushka had broken everything off and flung herself into the arms of her beloved. Well, it seemed

first love was the strongest after all. And now she had left the village without even saying good-bye. But why should she? She had said good-bye to the man she loved, who was now dead, and he, Davidov, just didn't matter. It was bound to have happened. His unwholesome affair with Lushka was like a careless, half-finished letter that breaks off in the middle of a word. And nothing more!

Davidov tossed about on his narrow bed, grunted and sighed, got up twice to smoke, and did not fall asleep till dawn. He awoke as soon as it was fully light. His brief sleep had not refreshed him. He got up feeling as if he had been through a heavy drinking bout. He was tortured by thirst, his head ached unbearably, his mouth was dry, and he felt slightly sick. Kneeling stiffly, he groped about for his boots under the bed and under the table and peered bewilderedly into empty corners. Only when he straightened up did he notice that he was wearing them on his feet. With a grunt of annoyance he whispered to himself: "Well, you've reached the bottom this time, sailor! Congratulations! It's the limit, and that's a fact! That perishing Lushka! It's four days since she left the village, but she's still with me."

At the well he stripped to the waist and for a long time, with gasps and groans, splashed icy water on his hot perspiring back and head. Presently he began to feel a little better and went to the collective-farm stables.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An hour later he was within sight of the third team's camp but even from a distance he could see that there was something amiss. A good half of the mowing-machines were standing idle, hobbled horses were loping

about the steppe, no one was raking up the drying swaths of grass, and there was not a sign of a hayrick all the way to the horizon.

By the team's wagon six Cossacks were seated on a homespun blanket engrossed in a game of cards, a seventh was sewing up his gaping shoe, and an eighth was sleeping comfortably in a cool spot beside one of the rear wheels of the wagon, his face buried in a crumpled and dirty tarpaulin raincoat. At the sight of Davidov the players, with the exception of one who, evidently disgruntled by recent losses, remained lounging on his elbow thoughtfully shuffling the cards, rose lazily to their feet.

Pale with fury, Davidov rode towards them at a gallop. "Call this work!" he yelled. "Why aren't you mowing? Where's Lyubishkin?"

"But today's Sunday," one of the card-players answered hesitantly.

"Do you think the weather will wait for you? Suppose it rains?!"

Davidov wheeled his horse so sharply that it side-stepped on to the blanket and, taking fright at the unexpected feel of it, reared up on its hind legs and leapt wildly in the other direction. Davidov lurched sideways and nearly lost his stirrups but managed to stay in the saddle. He leaned back and heaved on the reins, and when he had gained some control of his bucking mount, shouted even louder: "Where's Lyubishkin, I say?!"

"Out there mowing, second mower to the left of the hill. But what are you making such a noise about, chairman? You'll lose your voice if you're not careful." The sarcastic reply came from Ustin Rykalin, a middle-aged stockily built Cossack with a round thickly freckled face and flaxen brows that joined over the bridge of his nose.

"Why are you slacking like this? Answer me!" Davidov almost choked with indignation and shouting.

After a brief pause Alexander Nechayev, a quiet, weakly lad, who lived next door to Davidov, replied: "There's no one to drive the horses, that's the trouble. The women, and some of the girls, too, have gone off to church, and we've been kind of forced to take a holiday. We asked the silly wenches to give up the idea, but they wouldn't hear of it; ever so touchy they were, ready to snap our heads off. We couldn't hold 'em anyways. We tried everything but it was no good, believe me, Comrade Davidov!"

"Suppose I do. But you men, why aren't you working?" Davidov said with more restraint, but still unnecessarily loud.

His horse was thoroughly upset and kept dropping back on its haunches and twitching its ears in fright; nervous shivers rippled its skin. Keeping the animal on a tight rein, Davidov stroked its warm silky neck and waited patiently for an answer, but this time the silence was prolonged.

"I've told, we haven't got anyone to work with. The women have gone," Nechayev said lamely, looking round at the others for support.

"What do you mean, no one to work with? There are eight of you here doing nothing. You could have had four mowers working! And you amuse yourselves playing cards. I didn't expect that kind of attitude towards our common work from you, that's a fact!"

"And what did you expect? Did you think we were a lot of cattle?" Ustin asked defiantly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do the workers have days-off?"

"Yes, they do. But the factories don't stop working on Sundays, and the workers don't play cards at the bench, like you're doing here. Get me?"

"They have other shifts working on Sundays, but we're at it all the time, like the damned. Our necks are in the yoke from Monday to Saturday and now we're not to be free even on Sunday. What kind of system do you call that? Is that what Soviet power dictates? It dictates that there shouldn't be any distinction between the working people, and you're twisting the laws, trying to make them suit yourself."

"That's a lot of rot!" Davidov exclaimed furiously. "I want to lay in a proper winter's stock of hay for all the collective farm's cattle, and all your cows too. Understand? Is that suiting myself? What do I get out of it? You're just talking a lot of rot, you windbag!"

Ustin waved his hand scornfully. "All you care about is getting the plan fulfilled, nothing else matters to you. You worrying about our cattle, not likely! How many bullocks did they kill back in spring when they carted seed to Voiskovoy all the way from the station? More than you could count! And you try and pull the wool over our eyes!"

"The Voiskovoy collective farm's bullocks died on the road because fellows like you buried their grain in the earth. Joined the collective farm but hid their grain. We had to have something to sow, didn't we? So the bullocks had to be driven all that way in impossible conditions to fetch seed. That's why they died, and that's a fact! And you know it!"

"You only want to fulfil the plan, that's why you're making all this fuss about the hay," Ustin mumbled obstinately.

"Do you think I want to eat this hay myself? I'm doing what I can for the common good! What's the plan got to do with it?" Davidov shouted, losing his temper.

"Don't make such a noise, chairman, you won't scare me with your thunder and lightning. I've served in

the artillery. All right, let's say you're striving for the common good, but why drive people to death, making them work day and night? That's where the plan comes in. You're trying to show the district authorities what you can do, the district's trying to show the region, and we have to suffer for the jolly lot of you. Do you think the people don't see anything? Do you think they're blind? They see everything, but how can they keep away from climbers like you? We can't push you, or your like, out of your jobs, can we? Oh, no! And so you just do what you think you will. And Moscow's far away, Moscow don't know what tricks you get up to, here."

Contrary to Nagulnov's predictions, it was not with the women that Davidov was having trouble. But that did not make the task any easier. By the wary silence of the Cossacks Davidov realised that it was no use raising his voice, that, in fact, shouting might do more harm than good. He must muster all his patience and use the surest method—persuasion. As he stared attentively into Ustin's disgruntled face, he reflected with relief: It's a good job I didn't bring Makar with me! I'd have had a nasty fight on my hands by now.

To gain time and form some sort of plan for grappling with Ustin, and with any of the others who might support him, Davidov asked: "When I was elected chairman, did you vote for me, Ustin Mikhailovich?"

"No, I abstained! Why should I vote for you? They brought you here like a cat in a bag. . . ."

"I came here myself."

"Makes no difference, you were a pig in a poke to me. Why should I vote for you not knowing what kind of character you were!"

"And now you're against me?"

"Of course, I am! What did you expect?"

"Then put the question of my dismissal before a general meeting of the collective farm. The meeting's decision will be final. But you'd better find some good arguments for your proposal or you'll come a cropper."

"Don't worry, I won't come a cropper, and your case can wait, there'll be plenty of time for that. What we'd like to know now, while you're still chairman, is what you've done with our days-off?"

It was the simplest of questions to answer, but Ustin did not give Davidov a chance to open his mouth.

"Why can the women in the district centre, in the stanitsa, I mean, paint up their faces and powder themselves of a Sunday, why can they stroll round the streets all day and go dancing in the evenings, or to the cinema, while our women and girls have to sweat on Sundays, too?"

"This is summer, the busy season. . . ."

"It's always a busy season for us, winter and summer, all the year round."

"I meant to say. . . ."

"Save your breath! You've got nothing to say!"

Davidov raised his hand warningly: "Stop a minute, Ustin!"

But Ustin rapped back: "I've stopped here long enough in front of you like a labourer, while you sit in the saddle like a landlord."

"Wait a minute, I say. Can't you be spoken to as a human being?"

"What's the use of waiting. If I wait all day I won't hear any truth from you."

"Will you let me speak?" Davidov shouted, going purple.

"Don't yell at me! I'm not Lushka Nagulnova!" Ustin sucked in air through his distended nostrils and rapped out in a loud grating voice: "We won't let you yap at us here! You can jaw as much as you like at the meet-

ings, but here we do the talking. And you needn't snap at us for playing cards, chairman. We're our own bosses in the collective farm. We work when we like, and rest when we like. And you won't make us work on a holiday, you're too weak in the guts!"

"Have you finished?" Davidov asked, scarcely able to contain himself.

"No, I haven't. I'll tell you this to finish with. If you don't like our ways, you can get out, go back where you came from! No one asked you to come to the village. We'll get along somehow, God willing, without you. You're no shining light to us!"

This was sheer provocation. Davidov knew full well what Ustin was banking on, but he could not control his feelings. Black spots floated before his eyes as he stared almost blindly at Ustin's bushy brows and round, blurred face, distantly aware that his right hand, which held his whip, was swelling with heavy clots of blood that made his fingers ache.

Ustin stood before him with his hands thrust carelessly into his trouser pockets and his feet wide apart. His recent composure had returned immediately, and, feeling the silent support of the Cossacks and confident of his own superiority, he smiled with a calm and arrogant narrowing of his blue deep-set eyes. Davidov's face whitened and his lips moved soundlessly, unable to utter a word. He fought stubbornly with himself. He strained every nerve to stifle the blind, unreasoning fury that was in him, to keep his self-control. Ustin's words seemed to come from far away, but their meaning and the mocking inflections of his voice were quite clear.

"What are you gaping like a fish for, chairman? Have you swallowed your tongue or haven't you got an answer? I thought you were going to say something, but you seem to have forgotten it. . . . It's not so easy

to argue against the truth, is it! No, chairman, you'd better not try it on with us, and don't lose your temper over nothing. You'd better get quietly off that horse of yours and come and have a game of cards with us. We'll play 'Passing the Buck'. That's a clever man's game, not like running a collective farm."

One of the Cossacks standing behind Ustin laughed quietly and broke off. For a brief instant an ominous silence hung over the little group round the wagon. The only sound was that of Davidov's laboured breathing, the clatter of the mowing-machines in the distance and the appeasing, carefree song of the larks invisible in the azure sky. They, at any rate, were not concerned with what passed between the excited men gathered round the wagon.

Davidov raised his whip slowly above his head and spurred the horse with his heels. Ustin took a rapid stride forward, grabbed the bridle near the bit and, stepping sideways, pressed firmly against Davidov's leg.

"You wouldn't be going to hit me? Just you try!" he said with quiet menace.

His high cheek-bones were outlined sharply in his face and his eyes gleamed with cheerful defiance and impatient expectation.

But Davidov brought his whip down hard on the leg of his shabby boot and, looking down at Ustin in a vain attempt to smile, said loudly: "No, I won't hit you, Ustin. Don't hope for that, you White! If I'd come across you ten years ago, it'd have been a different matter. . . . You'd have stopped talking for ever then, you counter-revolutionary!"

Pushing Ustin aside with a light movement of his leg, Davidov dismounted.

"All right then, Ustin Mikhailovich, as you've taken the reins, go and tether the horse. You say you want

me to play cards with you? Fine, it'll be a pleasure! Let's have a game."

Events had taken rather an unexpected turn. The Cossacks exchanged glances, hesitated, then silently seated themselves round the blanket. Ustin tied the horse to a wheel of the wagon and sat down with his legs tucked under him Kalmyk fashion, shooting an occasional glance at Davidov. He by no means considered himself beaten in his encounter with Davidov and had decided to continue the conversation.

"Well, you still haven't said anything about our days-off, chairman! You've shelved that question, have you?"

"We shall discuss that later," Davidov promised meaningfully.

"How am I to take that? Sounds like a threat?"

"Why a threat! We've sat down to play cards, so other matters must wait. There'll still be time to talk."

But now as Davidov grew calmer Ustin became more and more agitated. Before he had played out the hand, he threw his cards irritably on the blanket and linked his arms round his knees.

"To hell with playing, let's talk about our days-off. Do you think it's only people who're worrying about these days-off, chairman? Oh, no! Yesterday morning I went out to harness up the horses, and the bay mare, she gave a sigh of grief and says to me in a human voice: 'Well, Ustin, what do you call this collective-farm life, eh? They work me on week-days, they don't let me out of harness day or night, and they don't even give me a rest at holiday time. It was different in the old days. They didn't used to make me work on Sundays, they only drove me out visiting or to weddings. Yes, in the old days my life was ever so much easier!'"

The Cossacks laughed quietly but in unison. Their sympathy seemed to be on Ustin's side. But there was an expectant hush when Davidov, fingering his Adam's apple, said quietly: "Who did she belong to, this amazing mare, before the collective farm started?"

Ustin screwed up his eyes slyly and even gave Davidov a quick wink. "You think she was mine, eh? Speaking my words? No, chairman, you've made a mistake there! She was Tit's mare, she's one of the animals you took when you dispossessed him. In the days when we farmed on our own she was fed different from what she is in the collective farm. She didn't smell scraps even in winter, she had nothing but oats, from her first tooth to her last, I reckon. Lived in luxury, she did!"

"She must be an old mare if she's lost her last tooth," Davidov remarked casually.

"Yes, she's an old 'un, getting on in years," Ustin replied readily, not suspecting a trap.

"Then you shouldn't listen to what that talkative old mare tells you," Davidov said with conviction.

"Why not?"

"Because kulaks' mares talk in the kulak style."

"But she's a collective farmer now."

"You're a collective farmer, too, to look at you, but in fact you're a kulak hanger-on."

"Now, that's going a bit too far, chairman."

"No, it isn't. And anyway if she's an old mare, what made you listen to her? She's losing her wits in her old age! If she'd been a bit younger and cleverer, she'd have had something different to say to you."

"What would she have said then?" Ustin asked warily.

"This is what she ought to have said: 'You know, Ustin, you're just a kulak hanger-on! In the winter you didn't work, you son-of-a-bitch, in the spring you didn't

work, pretended to be ill, and now you don't want to do any proper work either. What are you going to keep your bay mare on through the winter, and what are you going to use for grub yourself? We'll both of us die of hunger if we go on working like this!' That's what she ought to have said to you!"

Davidov's final words were drowned in a burst of laughter. Nechayev tittered like a girl and uttered little girlish squeals. Gerasim Zyablov even jumped to his feet and bellowed with laughter, doubling up and slapping the tops of his boots as if he were dancing. And the aged Tikhon Osetrov clutched his grey beard in his fist and shouted piercingly: "Lie down flat, Ustin, and stay down. Davidov's knocked the stuffing out of you!"

But to Davidov's surprise, Ustin remained quite unabashed and laughed himself, and his laughter was not in the least forced.

When silence was eventually restored, Ustin was the first to say: "Well, chairman, you have knocked me flat. I never thought you'd wriggle out of my clutches so smart. But you needn't have said that about me being a kulak hanger-on; and it's not true either that I was swinging the lead last spring. I really was ill. Excuse me, chairman, but you're telling lies there!"

"Prove it."

"How can I prove it?"

"With facts."

"Facts? But we've only been joking, chairman," Ustin, more serious now, responded with an uncertain smile.

"Cut the fooling!" Davidov said fiercely. "We haven't been joking, far from it. And this business you've started here is no joking matter. As for the facts, they're as plain as a pikestaff. You hardly do any work in the

collective farm, you try to pull the backward elements after you, you talk in a way that'll land you in trouble, and today, for example, you've succeeded in wrecking the start of a day's work. Thanks to your efforts, half the team is not mowing. Where the hell does the joke come in?"

Ustin's humorously raised eyebrows again joined at the bridge of his nose in a hard straight line.

"So as soon as I speak of having a day-off I'm a kulak hanger-on and a counter-revolutionary, am I? So you're the only one who's allowed to talk, and all the rest of us must keep quiet and wipe our mouths on our sleeves?"

"That's not the only reason!" Davidov retorted hotly. "Your conduct's been dishonest from start to finish, that's a fact! What are you moaning about days-off for when last winter you had as many as twenty days-off a month! And not only you, but all the rest of you sitting here. What did you do in winter apart from cleaning out the cattle and sorting seeds? Nothing! Lying snug over your warm stoves all the time! What right have you got to give yourselves days-off at the very busiest time of the year, when every hour counts and the hay may get ruined? Be honest about it!"

Ustin gave Davidov a long unblinking glance and made no reply. Tikhon Osetrov answered for him:

"This is no time for whispering, Cossacks. Davidov is right. We've made a blunder and it's for us to put it right. With our kind of work you can't take a holiday any time you like, it's true enough most of your time-off falls in winter. And it was the same in the old days of private ownership. Who of us ever got our farmwork done afore Intercession? As soon as you'd got the corn in you'd have to set about the autumn ploughing. Davidov's quite right, we shouldn't have let the women go off to church, and as for us sitting here

taking a Sunday off, there can't be any excuse.... We've made a proper blunder! We're just doing ourselves harm. And it's all your fault, Ustin, you led us astray, you grumbling devil!"

Ustin flared up like gunpowder. His blue eyes darkened and glittered with malice: "Have you any brains in your head, you bearded fool, or did you leave them at home?"

"That's just it, it looks as if I did."

"Then run back to the village and fetch them!"

Nechayev covered his mouth with a narrow hand to hide his smile, and in a high-pitched voice that was trembling with laughter asked the somewhat confused Osetrov: "Did you put 'em away in a safe place, Tikhon?"

"What's that to you?"

"Well, today's Sunday."

"What of it?"

"I dare say your daughter-in-law's been cleaning up this morning, sweeping the floors, and all that. And if you've left your little brain under a bench or a stool somewhere, she'll catch it with her broom and sweep it out into the yard. And there the chickens will scratch it up in a second.... You may have to live the rest of your life without a brain, that's what I'm worried about."

Everyone laughed including Davidov, but the Cosacks' laughter was not very cheerful. The recent tension had disappeared, however, and, as always in such cases, a joke had prevented a quarrel. When the offended Osetrov had cooled down a little, he said to Nechayev: "As far as I can see, Alexander, you haven't anything in the way of brains either to leave at home or to keep with you. Did you show yourself any cleverer than me? Your wife's a measuring the miles

to Tubyanskoy church right now, and you didn't say no to a game of cards either."

"Yes, I'm to blame, too," Nechayev replied good-humouredly.

But Davidov was still not satisfied with the results of the argument. He wanted to corner Ustin properly.

"Well, let's get to the bottom of this business about days-off," he said, staring hard at Ustin. "Did you do a lot of work this winter, Ustin Mikhailovich?"

"All I was told to."

"But how much?"

"I didn't count it."

"How many work-day units have you got to your credit?"

"I don't remember. I'm sick of your questions. Count them yourself if you've nothing better to do."

"I don't need to. You may have forgotten, but I'm chairman of the farm and I'm not allowed to forget."

How useful that bulky notebook that Davidov carried around with him proved now! His fingers were still trembling slightly from the nervous strain he had recently undergone as he thumbed through its dog-eared pages.

"Here's your name, you toiler! And here's how much you've earned. For January, February, March, April and May, altogether it comes to—I'll tell you in a minute—twenty-nine work-day units all told. How's that? Been working your fingers to the bone, eh?"

"That's not much of a showing, Rykalin!" one of the Cossacks said reproachfully, looking at Ustin.

But Ustin was not going to give in. "I've got another six months ahead of me, count your chickens when they're hatched."

"We'll count our chickens when they're hatched, and our earnings every day," Davidov said sharply. "And put this in your pipe and smoke it, Ustin. We won't

tolerate slackers in the collective farm! We'll kick all saboteurs out on their necks! We don't need any spongers. Think what you're coming to. Osetrov here has nearly two hundred work-day units to his credit, the other members of your team have all got over a hundred, even sick men like Nechayev are near the hundred mark, and all you've got is twenty-nine! It's a disgrace!"

"My wife's sick, she's got some kind of woman's trouble that puts her on her back for weeks on end. And on top of that there are six children to look after," Ustin said sullenly.

"What about yourself?"

"Myself?"

"Why aren't you working full out?"

And again Ustin's high cheek-bones blazed a cherry-red and sparks of malice gleamed in his angrily narrowed blue eyes.

"What are you staring at me for? Can't you look at anything but my eyes and face?!" he shouted, brandishing his clenched left fist agitatedly while the blue veins swelled in his round short neck. "Do you think I'm Lushka Nagulnova or Varya Kharlamova who's pining away for you! Look at my hands, and then ask me how much I work!"

He threw out his hands and only then did Davidov notice the solitary forefinger on Ustin's mutilated right hand and the wrinkled greyish brown patches that showed where the other fingers had been.

Davidov scratched his nose in perplexity.

"So that's it. . . . Where did you lose your fingers?"

"In the Crimea, on the Wrangel front. You called me a White, but I'm as pink as an overripe water-melon. I was with the Whites and I rubbed noses with the Greens for a fortnight, and I was with the Reds, too. I didn't much like serving with the Whites, so I hung

around in the rear most of the time, and when I started fighting them I lost my fingers for my pains. My drinking hand, the one I hold a glass with, is still whole, but the one that feeds me has lost its grabbers, see...."

"Shell splinter?"

"Grenade."

"What saved your forefinger?"

"It was on the trigger, that's what saved it. I killed two Wrangel men personally that day. So I had to pay for it, didn't I? Old God, he got annoyed with me for all that bloodshed so I had to sacrifice four fingers. I got off cheap, I reckon. He could have got real nasty and taken half my head as well."

Davidov's composure gradually communicated itself to Ustin. As the discussion became more peaceful his reckless temper cooled and the usual sarcastic grin appeared on his lips.

"Why didn't you sacrifice your last finger as well, what's it good for anyway?"

"You're mighty generous with other people's goods, chairman! This one comes in very useful around the house."

"What for?" Davidov asked, suppressing a smile.

"All kinds of things.... I shake it at my wife at night if she does something wrong, and in the day-time I pick my teeth with it and give good folk something to puzzle over. A poor man like me gets meat in his soup about once a year, but I go down the street every day after dinner, picking away at my teeth and spitting, and people think to themselves, that rascal Ustin lives well! Eats meat every day and still got plenty left! And you ask what my one finger's good for. It does its job! Let people think I'm rich. It's a nice feeling anyway."

"You've got a quick tongue in your head," Davidov said smiling in spite of himself. "Are you going to do any mowing today?"

"After such a pleasant chat? Of course!"

Davidov turned to Osetrov, addressing him as the oldest in the group: "Is it long since your women went off to Tubyanskoy?"

"About an hour ago, I reckon, no more."

"Many of them?"

"About a dozen. Them women, they're just like sheep. If one goes they all follow. And sometimes it's a black sheep that leads the flock. . . . Yes, we gave in to Ustin, plague on him! Taking a holiday in the middle of the mowing!"

Ustin laughed good-naturedly.

"So I'm in the wrong again? Don't push all the blame on to me, longbeard! The women have gone to pray, what's that got to do with me? It was old Atamanchukova and one of the other old girls in the village who led them off the straight and narrow. Those two came here at the break of day to talk them round! Today is the feast of the holy martyr Saint Glikeria, they said, and you, women, are going to mow? It's a great sin! And so off they went. I asked the old girls what Glikeria they meant. Maybe it was Lukeriya Nagulnova, eh? She's a real martyr, she is. Spent all her life in torment with this one or that one! The way those old girls went for me! Old Atamanchukova even brandished her stick and tried to hit me. Luckily I ducked in time or I'd have had a bump on my head like a Dutch gander. Then our women got hold of me like burrs in a dog's tail, I only just managed to get away from 'em. What an unlucky chap I am! This is my unlucky day, this is! Just look at me, folk, had a row with the old women and the young ones and the chairman and Osetrov here, that greybeard, all in one morning! That takes some doing, that does!"

"You can do it all right! You don't need anyone

to teach you. You've been sparring up to anyone and everyone like a fighting cock ever since you were a lad. But mark my words, a fighting cock always has a bleeding comb," Osetrov said warningly.

Ustin seemed not to hear him. Watching Davidov with impudent fearless eyes, he went on: "But today's been a good day for agitators. They come to us on foot and on horseback. If the railway was nearer they'd come racing here on steam engines! But you ought to learn the real way to agitate from our old women, chairman. They're older than you and craftier, and they've had more experience. They talk very quiet and affectionate-like, and as polite as you could wish; and that's how they get what they're after. Never a single misfire! But how do you set about it? Almost before you've got here you're shouting at the top of your voice: 'Why aren't you working?!' Who talks to the people like that nowadays? Soviet power has come, and the people, you know, they've dug their pride up out of their big chests, and they don't fancy being shouted at. They don't like being rubbed up the wrong way, chairman. And even in the days of the tsar, by the by, the atamans didn't bawl too much at the Cossacks—they were afraid of offending the elders. And you and Nagulnov ought to realise by now that times have changed, and you'd better give up the old habits.... Do you think I'd have agreed to mow today if you hadn't taken yourself in hand? Not likely! But you put the rein on yourself, curbed your bad temper and agreed to have a hand of cards with us. You talked to us reasonably—and here I am! Take me with your bare hands and I'll agree to anything, whether it's playing cards or building a rick."

Davidov felt bitterly dissatisfied and angry with himself as he listened attentively to what Ustin was saying. After all, in some ways he was right, this cock-

sure Cossack. He was right at least in saying that Davidov should never have begun by shouting and cursing as soon as he arrived at the camp. That, as Ustin had remarked, was the reason why he had got nowhere to start with. Why hadn't he been able to control himself? And Davidov had frankly to admit to himself that he had unconsciously begun to adopt the rough, Nagulnov way of treating people; he had "slipped the collar", as Andrei Razmyotnov would say. And this was the result. He was slyly advised to follow the example of some old women who acted carefully and craftily and always got what they wanted. It was all as plain as a pikestaff. He ought to have ridden quietly up to the camp, had a quiet chat with the people and convinced them that this was not the time for getting into a holiday mood; but instead he had shouted at them all, and at one moment he had nearly brought his whip into play. In one brief instant he might have destroyed all his work in building up the collective farm, and that might well have meant putting his Party card on the table at the district committee.... Yes, that would have been a really terrible disaster for him!

At the mere thought of what might have happened if he had not taken a grip on himself in time Davidov felt his shoulders twitch and a feverish shiver run down his spine.

Completely absorbed in these unpleasant reflections, Davidov gazed fixedly at the cards scattered on the blanket, and for some reason suddenly remembered his love of pontoon during the Civil War. I overloaded my hand this time, he thought, bought at least a ten on top of sixteen, that's a fact! It was not very pleasant for him to admit his lack of restraint, but he found the courage to do so and, though not without some inward resistance, finally said: "As a matter of fact, I needn't have bawled at you like that, you're right there, Ustin.

But it made me sore to find you not working, can't you see? And you didn't whisper at me either. But, of course, we could have come to an agreement without yelling at each other. Well, that's enough of that. Go and harness your fastest horses to a cart, and you, Nechayev, put another suitable pair in this drozhki."

"You going to chase the women?" Ustin asked, not concealing his astonishment.

"That's it. I'm going to try and persuade the women to work today."

"But will they obey you?"

"We'll see. Persuasion's not an order."

"Well, may the big God and all the little gods help you! Look here, chairman, what about taking me with you? Eh?"

Davidov agreed without hesitation.

"Come on then. But will you help me to persuade the women?"

Ustin wrinkled his parched lips in a grin: "My deputy will help you, I'll make a point of bringing him along, too!"

"What deputy?" Davidov glanced at Ustin in perplexity.

For an answer Ustin walked to the wagon and after rummaging under a heap of coats pulled out a new long whip with a smart leather tassel on the handle.

"Here he is. A good one, eh? He's a fine persuader, he is! Just a whistle from him and the job's done. Don't worry about me being left-handed."

Davidov frowned.

"Drop that! I won't let you lay a finger on the women, but I'll gladly try out that deputy on your back!"

But Ustin merely grinned mockingly.

"Once upon a time grandpa wanted to enjoy his plate of dumplings but the dog ate the cottage cheese. . . . As an invalid of the Civil War, I'm privileged. Whip-

ping makes women plumper and more willing, I know that from my own wife. Who're the ones to be whipped? Women, of course! What are you scared of? I shall only need to warm two or three of 'em properly, and the rest will be into that cart like the wind!"

Considering the conversation over, he took a bridle that had been lying under the wagon and went up the hill to catch the horses. Nechayev and the other Cosacks hurried after him all except Osetrov.

"Why don't you go and mow, Tikhon Gordeich?" Davidov asked.

"I wanted to put in a word for Ustin. Can I?"

"Go on."

"Don't be angry with him, the fool, for the Lord's sake! He's a proper fool when he gets a flea in his ear," Osetrov said pleadingly.

But Davidov cut him short: "He's no fool, he's an open enemy of collective-farm life! We shall fight his kind ruthlessly as we always have done in the past."

"An enemy!" Osetrov exclaimed in astonishment. "I tell you he doesn't know what he's doing when he's angry, that's all! I've known him since he was a lad, and he's always been touchy. Before the Revolution our elders thrashed him hundreds of times at village meetings for going against them. They thrashed him so he couldn't sit down or stand up, but he didn't care! He'd hold his pants loose for a week, then go back to his old ways. Never lets anyone off, picks holes in everyone. And how he loves picking 'em! Like a dog scratching for fleas! Why should he be an enemy of the collective farm? He's been a thorn in the side of the rich all his life, and you ought to see how he lives himself! His shack's nearly tumbling down, all he's got is one cow and a couple of mangy sheep. Never had any money and still hasn't. A flea in one pocket and a louse in the other—that's all the riches he's got! And now his wife's

ill, the children are a nuisance and his poverty's getting him down. Maybe that's why he snaps at everybody. And you call him an enemy. He's just a chatterbox, not an enemy."

"Is he a relation of yours by any chance? Why are you standing up for him?"

"That's just it, he's my nephew."

"So that's why you're going to such pains."

"But, of course, Comrade Davidov. He's got six children round his neck and they're all tiny tots, and his tongue's like a threshing mill. I've told him time and again, 'Keep a rein on your tongue, Ustin. You'll talk yourself into trouble. One day you'll get worked up and say something that'll land you in Siberia, then you'll kick yourself for it, but it'll be too late!' And he answers me back, 'Are the folk in Siberia all that different from other people? I won't feel the cold wind there either, I'm hardened to it already!' Just try and do anything with a fool like him! But why should his children suffer? It's hard to bring them up, but these days you can make orphans of them in no time."

Davidov closed his eyes and thought hard. At that moment he might have been remembering his own dark, unhappy childhood.

"Don't be angry with him for his silly talk," Osetrov repeated.

Davidov passed his hand over his face and seemed to wake up.

"Listen to me, Tikhon Gordeich," he said very slowly and distinctly. "I shan't touch Ustin for the time being. Let him do what work he can in the collective farm. We won't overburden him, let him do what he can manage. If he's short of work-day units at the end of the year, we'll help him. We'll allot him some grain for his children out of the common fund. Understand? But you just tell him quietly from me that if he tries

to stir up trouble again in the team and lead the people into bad ways, he'll be for it! Make him see sense before it's too late! I'm not going to joke with him any more, tell him that. It's not Ustin I'm sorry for, I'm sorry for his kiddies!"

"Thank you for your kind words, Comrade Davidov! And thank you for not bearing Ustin a grudge," Osetrov said and made a low bow.

But Davidov suddenly burst out furiously: "What are you bowing to me for? I'm not an ikon! I'll do what I've said I'll do without any bowing from you!"

"It's an 'old custom with us. If you thank a man, you bow to him," Osetrov replied with dignity.

"All right then, old man. But tell me this. How are Ustin's children for clothes? And how many of them go to school?"

"All of them sit over the stove in winter, they've nothing to go outside in. In summer they run about in rags. They got a few clothes from the kulaks after the dispossessing, but it wasn't enough to cover their nakedness. In winter Ustin took the last of the lads away from school because he had no clothes or shoes to put on him. The lad's getting big, he must be twelve years old by now, and he's ashamed to wear rags like a Gypsy."

Davidov scratched furiously at the back of his head and suddenly turned away.

"Go and mow."

His voice had an unpleasant husky note in it. Osetrov threw a keen glance at Davidov's disconsolately hunched shoulders, bowed once again and walked away slowly to the mowers.

When he had recovered a little, Davidov turned and watched Osetrov's retreating figure. Amazing people these Cossacks are, he thought. Just try and get to the bottom of a fellow like Ustin. Is he a downright enemy

or just a windbag and a bully who says the first thing that comes into his head? Every day they set me a fresh crossword puzzle! I've got to understand them, damn it. And I will! If I have to eat a whole sack of salt with them to do it, and that's a fact!

His reflections were interrupted by Ustin, who rode up at a gallop, leading another horse by its halter.

"What do we need to harness the drozhki for, chairman? Let's use the second cart. I reckon the women won't get too much of a shaking even in carts if they agree to come back."

"No, harness up the drozhki," said Davidov.

He had thought everything out and he knew that the drozhki might come in useful if he were successful.

After about forty minutes' fast driving they spotted in the distance a colourful group of festively dressed women making their way slowly up the summer track on the opposite slope of a ravine.

Ustin drew level with Davidov.

"Well, chairman, stand firm! Now the women will give you another basting!"

"'We'll see!' the blind man said," Davidov replied cheerfully, touching the horses up with reins.

"Aren't you scared?"

"Why should I be? There's only twelve of them or perhaps a few more."

"And suppose I help 'em?" Ustin asked, smiling mysteriously.

Davidov scanned his face closely and could not decide whether he was serious or joking.

"How will things turn out then?" Ustin asked again, but now he was not smiling.

Davidov resolutely checked his horse, climbed down from the cart and went up to the drozhki. He slipped

his hand into the right-hand pocket of his jacket, took out the pistol that Nesterenko had given him and placed it on Ustin's knee.

"Take this toy and put it away somewhere so it'll be out of mischief. If you happen to take sides with those women, I'm afraid I won't be able to resist the temptation of putting a bullet through your head."

He gently freed the whip from Ustin's sweating hand, swung his arm and threw the whip far away from the road.

"Now let's go! Put a spurt on, Ustin Mikhailovich, and take good note of the place where your whip fell. We'll pick it up on the way back, that's a fact! And you'll return my pistol when we get back to camp. Off we go!"

When they came up with the women Davidov drove round them with a flourish and swung the cart across the road in front of them. Ustin halted the drozhki next to the cart.

"Good-day, fair lassies!" Davidov greeted the churchgoers with a show of gaiety.

"Good-day to you, if you're not joking," the liveliest of the women answered for them all.

Davidov jumped down from the cart, doffed his cap and bowed: "I request you in the name of the collective-farm management to return to work. Your men have sent me to you, they are mowing already."

"We're going to church, not to a party!" an elderly woman with a red perspiring face shouted belligerently.

Davidov pressed his crumpled cap to his chest with both hands. "After the mowing you can pray as much as you like, but this is the wrong time for it. Look at the clouds coming up, and you haven't got a single rick built yet. The hay will rot! Every bit of it! And if the hay's ruined, the cattle will die off in the winter. You know that better than I do!"

"Where do you see any clouds?" a fresh-faced girl retorted scornfully. "There's not a speck in the sky!"

"The barometer says rain, never mind the clouds," Davidov argued desperately. "There's rain coming for sure! Come back with me, dear lassies, and you can go and pray next Sunday. What difference does it make to you? Jump in and I'll drive you like the wind! Jump in, my dears, there's no time to lose."

Davidov argued with the collective-farm women without sparing gentle words, and the women began to waver and whisper among themselves. And it was then that, to Davidov's complete surprise, Ustin came to his aid. Approaching Nechayev's tall and portly wife silently from behind, he swept her up in his arms and, ignoring the blows that the laughing woman showered upon him, carried her at a run to the cart and lowered her gently into the back. The women scattered squealing and laughing.

"Get into the cart yourselves or I'll take my whip to you!" Ustin yelled at the top of his voice, rolling his eyes wildly. And then he burst out laughing himself: "Get in, I won't touch you, but hurry up, you long-tailed devils!"

Standing at her full height in the cart and adjusting her head shawl, which had slipped off her head, Nechayev's wife shouted: "Get in quick, girls! Do you expect me to wait for you? Think what an honour it is—the chairman himself has come for us!"

The women came up from three sides and jostling each other and laughing and casting quick glances at Davidov climbed into the cart without more ado. Only two old women remained standing in the road.

"Are we to walk all the way to Tubyanskoy alone, you devil!" old Atamanchukova cried, boring into Davidov with hate-filled eyes.

But Davidov summoned all his sailor's gallantry to his aid and with a bow and a resounding snap of his heels, replied: "Why should you walk, grandma? Here is a drozhki specially provided for you. Climb in and go and do all the praying you want. Ustin Mikhailovich will drive you there. He'll wait till the service is over, then drive you back to the village."

Time was too precious for him to wait for the old women's consent. He took each of them by the arm and led them to the drozhki. Old Atamanchukova hung back, but Ustin helped her on with gentle and respectful pressure from behind. Somehow they managed to install the old women in the drozhki and, as he shook out the reins, Ustin said very quietly: "You're crafty as the devil, Davidov!"

It was the first time he had addressed his chairman by name.

Davidov noticed it and smiled feebly. The restless night and the emotional strain of the past few hours had told on him and sleep was claiming its own.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Well, it's a grand grass crop this year! If the rain don't make a mess of it for us and we finish the mowing while it's dry, we'll have hay in plenty!" said Agafon Dubtsov as he entered Davidov's little office and sat down on a bench grunting wearily.

When he had made himself comfortable he put his faded cap down beside him, wiped the sweat from his pock-marked and deeply sunburnt face with the sleeve of his cotton shirt, and addressed himself with a smile to Davidov, and the book-keeper and Ostrovnov, who were sitting with him at his desk.

"Good-day to you, chairman, and to you, pen-pushers!"

"Farmer Dubtsov has arrived!" the book-keeper said with a snort. "Take a close look at this man, Comrade Davidov! How can you call yourself a farmer, Agafon?"

"What do you think I am then?" Dubtsov eyed the book-keeper challengingly.

"Anything you like, but not a farmer."

"What then?"

"I wouldn't really like to say...."

Dubtsov's menacing frown seemed to make his dark face even darker. With obvious impatience he said: "None of your tricks, tell me what you think I am, and quick about it! And if the word has got stuck in your throat, let me pat you on the back once or twice, that'll make you talk!"

"Well, you're a real Gypsy, that's what you are," the book-keeper said emphatically.

"Me—a Gypsy? What makes you say that?"

"I have my reasons."

"Even a flea has its reasons for biting. So you just explain the rotten reason for your cheek."

The book-keeper took off his spectacles and scratched behind his ear with a pencil.

"Don't lose your temper, Agafon, just listen to what I have to say. Farmers work in the fields, don't they? But Gypsies wander round the villages begging and stealing if they get the chance. And you're the same. What have you come to the village for? Not to steal? Then you must have come to ask for something. Isn't that so?"

"Ask for something..." Dubtsov said doubtfully "Couldn't I just have come to see you? Can't a man just come to the village, or must he always be on some business or other? Are you going to forbid me, you goggle-eyed pen-pusher?"

"Well, what have you come for?" Davidov asked smiling.

But Dubtsov pretended not to hear. He surveyed the dark little room attentively and uttered a sigh of envy: "Some people have a cushy life, may they sit on hedgehogs! Here they are with their shutters shut and the floor sprinkled with cold water. As dark and cool and quiet as you could wish! Not a single fly, not even a mosquito. But out in the steppe, by hell, there's the sun beating down on you from morning to night, and in the day-time the gadflies bleed you like cattle, and every rotten little fly sticks to you like a nagging wife, and at night you can't sleep a wink for the mosquitoes. And they're not just ordinary mosquitoes, they're as big as guardsmen! You wouldn't believe it, lads, but every blasted one of 'em is the size of a sparrow, and when they've done sucking your blood, they get a lot bigger than a sparrow, and that's the truth. Them mosquitoes, they're a nasty yellow colour and their sting's about an inch long, honest to God! The amount of torture we have to put up with from all these flying horrors, the amount of blood that pours out of us—why, it's as bad as the Civil War, I'm telling you straight!"

"You know how to tell the tale, Agafon!" Ostrovnov said chuckling. "You'll soon be beating Grandad Shchukar at it."

"Why should I tell the tale? You sit here on your arse in the cool, but just go out in the steppe and you'll see for yourself," Dubtsov snapped, but a smile still lingered in his slyly puckered eyes.

He seemed ready to prolong his mock-serious tale of woe about the trials and troubles that beset his team, but Davidov interrupted him: "That's enough kidding! Don't come crying to us and trying to throw dust in our eyes. Say what you've come for and no nonsense. Do you want help?"

"It wouldn't do any harm."

"Who have you lost, you poor little orphan—mother or father?"

"You're a good 'un at joking, Comrade Davidov, but there was mirth at our birth, too, you know."

"Well, I'm asking you seriously. What are you short of? People?"

"Yes, we're short of people, too. On the slopes of Blackthorn Gully—you've seen it yourself—there's a fine crop of grass, but you can't use machines on the slopes and hillocks, and there's mighty few mowers with hand scythes in the team. It's a terrible pity to think of that grass going to waste."

"Maybe you'd like me to give you two or three mowing-machines out of the first team, eh?" Davidov asked slyly.

Dubtsov sighed and gave him a searching and melancholy glance. After a long pause, he gave another sigh and said: "I won't refuse. An old maid don't refuse a one-eyed husband. . . . The way I see it is this. Our work in the collective farm is done in common, for the common good, and there's nothing to be ashamed of in accepting help from another team. Isn't that so?"

"Of course, it is. But isn't mowing with someone else's horses for two days something to be ashamed of?"

"What d'you mean, somebody else's?" There was such genuine surprise in Dubtsov's voice that Davidov could scarcely restrain a smile.

"As if you didn't know! Don't you know who drove off two pairs of Lyubishkin's horses while they were grazing? Our book-keeper must be right. You've got a streak of the Gypsy in you. You're fond of asking for things, and you're more than fond of other folks' horses."

Dubtsov turned away and spat in disgust.

"Call them horses! Those knock-kneed nags wan-

dered into our camp of their own accord, no one drove 'em there. And anyhow, why call 'em somebody else's if they belong to our collective farm?"

"Then, why didn't you send them straight back to the third team instead of waiting till the owners themselves came and unharnessed them from your mowers?"

Dubtsov laughed.

"Fine owners they are! Couldn't find their horses for two days in their own district! Call them owners? Idiots, more like it! But all that's past, and Lyubishkin and I have made it up already, so there's no need to bring up bygones. And I didn't come here for help at all, I came here on an important matter. Do you think I'd have left the mowing if it wasn't specially important? If the worst comes to the worst, we'll manage without any help at all. And that old pen-pusher, book-keeper Mikheich, calls me a Gypsy. I consider that's unjust! We ask for help only when we're in dire need, and we have to grit our teeth while we're doing it because our pride won't let us. But what does poor old Mikheich know about agriculture? He was born on an abacus and he'll die on one. Just you lend him to me for a week, Davidov. I'll put him on a reaper and lead the horses myself. I'll teach him how to work! He ought to get some sweat on 'those goggles of his for once in his life!"

The half-joking discussion was beginning to develop into a quarrel, but Davidov averted it with a hurried question: "What's this important matter that's worrying you, Agafon?"

"Well, you see... To us, of course, it's important, but we don't know at all how you'll look at it. Anyway, I've brought along three applications ... they're written in ink, of course. We begged a bit of indelible pencil off our time-keeper, melted the lead in boiling water and wrote all these here applications the same like."

Davidov, who had been getting ready to give Dubtsov a severe dressing down for his "sponging habits", asked curiously: "What applications?"

Ignoring the question, Dubtsov went on: "As I see it, I ought to have gone to Nagulnov with 'em, but he wasn't at home, he's gone off to the first team, so I reckoned to hand these papers in to you. I couldn't take 'em back with me, could I?"

"What are the applications about?" Davidov asked again impatiently.

Dubtsov's face had grown serious and bore no trace of his recent flippancy. Unhurryingly he took a fragment of comb out of his breast pocket, smoothed back his sweat-matted hair, composed himself, and only then, checking his inward excitement and choosing his words with great care, he began:

"All of us, that is to say, us three, want to go in for this business—we want to join the Party. And we ask our Gremyachy Party group to accept us for the Bolshevik Party. We've talked it over for many nights, we've looked at it from all angles, and we've had all kinds of debates about it, and now we've decided unanimously—to join! Before we turned in for the night, we'd go out into the steppe and start thinking up criticisms against each other, but all the same we came to the conclusion that each of us was fit for the Party. And now it's up to you to decide for yourselves. One of us kept bringing up the fact that he'd served with the Whites. But I says to him: 'You served with the Whites against your will, for five months, in the rank and file, and you went over to the Red Army voluntary, and served as a section commander for two years, so that means your last term of service makes up for the one before, and you're fit for the Party.' And the other chap said that you, Davidov, had asked him if he'd like to join the Party long ago, but he refused because he

was so attached to his own bullocks. But now he says: 'How can I feel that way when there are kulaks' sons about, with guns, trying to dig up the past. I disown the love of the bullocks I used to have and other livestock and put my name down for the Party so that I'll be able to stand up for Soviet power shoulder to shoulder with the Communists, as I did ten years ago.' And I hold that opinion, too, and so we've written our applications. To be honest, none of them are written very clear, but. . . ." At this point Dubtsov gave Mikheich a sidelong glance and concluded: "But we weren't trained to be book-keepers and clerks, and everything we've scratched on these here papers is the genuine truth."

Dubtsov fell silent, again wiped the perspiration that had broken out on his forehead and, leaning over a little, carefully extracted from his right-hand trousers' pocket the three applications wrapped in a newspaper.

All this was so unexpected that for a minute there was complete silence in the room. None of those present uttered a word, but each of them reacted in his own way to what Dubtsov had said. The book-keeper stopped perusing the latest report from the fields, pushed his spectacles on to his forehead and stared short-sightedly at Dubtsov in dazed astonishment; Ostrovnov, unable to conceal a sombre and contemptuous smile, turned away to the window, and Davidov, his whole face beaming joyfully, threw himself back in his chair so violently that the chair rocked to and fro and creaked plaintively.

"Take our papers, Comrade Davidov." Dubtsov unfolded the newspaper and handed Davidov several sheets torn from a school notebook and scrawled with large uneven letters.

"Who are the applications from?" Davidov asked with a ring in his voice.

"Beskhlebnov the younger, myself, and Kondrat Maidannikov."

Davidov accepted the applications and said with restrained emotion: "This is a very moving fact and a big event for you, Comrade Dubtsov, and for Comrades Maidannikov and Beskhlebnov, and for us, the members of the Gremyachy Party group. I shall pass your applications on to Nagulnov today, so go back now and tell your comrades that on Sunday we shall consider their applications at an open Party meeting. We'll start at seven o'clock in the evening, in the school. No one must be late, so mind you get there on time. But I know you'll see to that. As soon as you've had your dinner take the best horses you've got and come straight to the village. And another thing. Have you got anything better than a cart out there at the camp?"

"There's a trap."

"Well, come to the village in that." Davidov's face once again broke into an almost childish happy smile. Then he gave Dubtsov a wink: "And mind you're dressed up like bridegrooms for the occasion! This happens only once in a lifetime, mate. It's an event. . . . It's like youth, only comes once in your life."

He seemed to lack words to express himself and fell silent, evidently much moved, then with a sudden note of alarm in his voice he asked: "Does the trap look all right?"

"Well, it's got four wheels. But it's only fit for carting dung. You can't ride in it in the day-time, you'd be ashamed. Night's the only time, in the dark. It's all scratched and knocked about, must be about my age, I reckon, but Kondrat Maidannikov says that our village Cossacks captured it off Napoleon near Moscow."

"That won't do!" Davidov said emphatically. **"I'll send Grandad Shchukar out for you in a sprung drozhki. I**

said it's an event that happens only once in a lifetime, didn't I!"

He wanted to make as fine an occasion as possible of the entry into the Party of these men whom he liked and trusted, and he tried hard to think of something that would lend colour to this great day.

"We'll have the school replastered and whitewashed by Sunday, it's got to look good as new," he said at last, staring absently at Ostrovnov. "Sweep out the yard and sprinkle some fresh sand on the playground. Do you hear, Lukich? The desks and floors must be scrubbed, the ceilings washed and the rooms aired—I want the whole place ship-shape!"

"And if there's so many people they can't all get into the school, what then?" Ostrovnov asked.

"If only we could build a club, that'd be the thing!" Davidov said in a quiet, dreamy voice instead of answering. But in a moment he was back to reality. "Don't let any children or youngsters in, there'll be room enough then. But that school's got to look spick and span, fit for a big day!"

"How about the recommendations? Who'll vouch for us?" Dubtsov asked before he left.

Davidov gripped his hand firmly and smiled. "You're worried about the recommendations? Don't worry about that. We'll write them out for you this evening, that's a fact! Well, good luck. Give our regards to all the mowers and ask them to see that the grass doesn't stand too long and doesn't get too dry in the swathes. Can we rely on the second team?"

"You can always rely on us, Davidov," Dubtsov replied with unaccustomed seriousness, nodded in parting and left.

Early the following morning Davidov was awakened by his landlord:

"Up you get, lodger, there's a mounted messenger arrived from the field of battle. . . . Stump-fist Ustin's just galloped in bareback from the third team. He looks a bit knocked about and he's not dressed proper."

The man was grinning from ear to ear, but Davidov, who had only just awoken, failed at first to understand what it was all about. Raising his head from the crumpled pillow, he murmured indifferently: "What's the matter?"

"There's a messenger here, I say, looks all beaten up. Must have come for help."

At last Davidov grasped the meaning of what his host was saying and began hastily pulling on his clothes. In the porch he hurriedly rinsed his face in tepid water that had not cooled over the night, and went out on to the steps.

Below him, grasping the reins with one hand and brandishing his other at a young filly that was still hot and steaming from the ride, stood Ustin Rykalin. His faded dark-blue cotton shirt had been ripped in several places and clung to his shoulders by a miracle; his left cheek was blue-black with bruises from cheek-bone to chin, and his left eye had swollen into a purple lump, but the right was gleaming with excitement and anger.

"How did you collect that little lot?" Davidov asked promptly, walking down the steps and forgetting even to say good-morning.

"Robbery, Comrade Davidov. Daylight robbery, with violence!" Ustin shouted hoarsely. "What a lot of bastards to do a thing like that, eh?! Whoa there, you God-forsaken hag!" And he again took a furious swing at the horse, which had nearly trodden on his foot.

"Talk sense," Davidov told him.

"It's the best sense there is! Call themselves neighbours, may they be burned to ashes, may they be struck

with fever, the thieving parasites! How do you like that? The Tubyanskoy men, our neighbours, blast 'em, they snooped into Guelder Nook last night and carted off at least thirty hayricks. I woke up at dawn and saw two of the last carts being loaded with our own home-grown hay, and not a rick left. So I jumped on my horse and went galloping up to them. 'What do you think you're doing, you so-and-so's?! What right have you got to take our hay?!' And one of 'em, the swine, on the cart nearest me, laughs and says: 'Used to be yours, now it's ours. Don't come mowing on other people's land.' 'How do you mean—other people's? Can't you see where the boundary mark is, blast you?' And he says: 'Get your peepers open and look where it is. This land's been ours, Tubyanskoy land, for centuries. Lord bless you for taking the trouble and cutting the hay for us.' Aha, so that's what it was! Fiddle with the posts, would you? So I dragged him off that cart and gave him one between the eyes with my stump to help him see better and not get mixed up between his own land and other people's. It was a good punch, and over he went, turned out to be not very steady on his legs, he did. But then three more of 'em came running up. I made another of 'em kiss the ground, but after that I had no time to bash 'em any more because all four of 'em were bashing me. What's one against four? By the time our fellows got to the spot they'd made a lovely sight of me, like an Easter egg, and torn my shirt to ribbons. What swine, eh? How shall I show myself to the wife now? They could have beaten me up, but why grab hold of me and tear the shirt off my back? Now what am I to do with it? If I give it up to dress a scarecrow, I reckon that scarecrow will feel ashamed of standing in such a rag, and it's no good for the girls to make ribbons of either, it's not the right kind of material.... Just wait till I meet one of those Tu-

byanskoy men alone in the steppe! He'll come home to his wife as black and blue as I am!"

Davidov put his arms round Ustin and laughed. "Don't take it to heart—you can earn another shirt, and the bruises will heal for the wedding."

"For your wedding?" Ustin asked slyly.

"For the next one they hold in the village. I haven't sent the matchmakers to anyone so far. Do you remember what your uncle told you last Sunday: 'A quarrelsome cock's comb is always bleeding.'"

Davidov smiled and thought, this is the grandest thing that could have happened, Ustin, old chap, you taking on a fight for the sake of the collective farm's hay, and not just for your own personal stuff. Yes, it's a real touching fact!

But Ustin shook him off.

"It's all right for you to grin, Davidov, but all my ribs are cracking. Don't try and laugh it off, get on a horse and go over to Tubyanskoy to save the hay. We got those two cartloads back, but how many more did they get away with during the night? Let 'em bring the hay right to the village to make up for their stealing, that'll be fair." And with an effort he parted his swollen, blood-encrusted lips in a smile: "You'll see, there'll only be women bringing that hay back; their men will be scared to pay us a visit. But it was their men who did the stealing, and they picked such hefty blighters that when the four of them started battering me with their fists, it made my inside turn over. They wouldn't have let me fall even if I'd begged them to! They just passed me round from one to the other till our chaps ran up. I didn't spare my fists either, but it's numbers that count."

Ustin tried to smile again but his face twisted.

"You should have seen our Lyubishkin, Comrade Davidov, you'd have split your sides. There he was run-

ning round us crouching down like a dog that wants to jump over a fence and shouting fit to kill himself: 'Bash 'em, lads, knock the stuffing out of 'em! Pile in, lads, they can stand a good beating, I know them!' But he wouldn't join in the fight himself. My uncle Osetrov got wild and shouted at him: 'Come and help us, you great gelding! Or have you got boils on your back?!' And Lyubishkin was almost in tears, 'I can't!' he says, 'I'm a Party man and a team-leader at that! You knock the stuffing out of 'em, I'll put up with it somehow!' And he kept running round us and gnashing his teeth because he had to bottle himself up. Well, we mustn't waste time. Go and have some breakfast and meanwhile I'll find a horse for you somewhere and we'll go to the team together. The old men told me I mustn't show my face unless I'd got you with me. We're not going to give our own homegrown hay to a bunch of parasites for nothing!"

Taking the question of the trip to Tubyanskoy as settled, Ustin tied his filly to the rail of the porch and went into the management office yard. Yes, I must go and see Polyanyitsa, Davidov reflected. If that hay was taken with his knowledge, we're going to have a quarrel. He's stubborn as a donkey, but I'll have to tackle him.

Davidov hurriedly drank a mug of fresh milk, and as he munched a dry hunk of bread, he saw an unusually nimble Ustin dressed in a new shirt galloping up on Nagulnov's dun stallion.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Although they had only met a few times at the district committee and had known each other mainly by hearsay. Nikifor Polyanyitsa, chairman of the Red

Ray collective farm in Tubyanskoy, who was one of the twenty-five thousand volunteers for Party work in the rural districts and had once been a turner at an engineering works in Dniepropetrovsk, greeted Davidov at the farm management's house like an old friend.

"Well, well, well, dear Comrade Davidov! Son of the Baltic Sea! What brings you here to our backward in all respects collective farm? Come in and sit down, you're a welcome guest!"

Polyanitsa's broad face with its sprinkling of freckles glowed with an assumed and rather crafty smile, his little black eyes shone with apparent welcome. But the excessive warmth of his greeting put Davidov on his guard and, responding drily, he sat down at the table and made an unhurried survey of his surroundings.

The chairman's office seemed a strange place to Davidov. The large room was cluttered with dusty plants in ochred tubs and clay pots; old wooden chairs kept mournful company with dirty stools; a dilapidated sofa of curious shape with bulging rusty springs stood near the door; the walls were gawdy with pictures cut from the magazine *Niva* and cheap lithographs depicting scenes such as the Baptism of Russia at Kiev, the siege of Sevastopol, the Battle of Shipka and the charge of the Japanese infantry at Liaoyang in the war of 1904.

Over the chairman's table hung a yellowed picture of Stalin and the opposite wall was adorned with a coloured fly-blown poster advertising Morozov's thread factory. It showed a gallant toreador in a scarlet tunic who had slung a noose of thread over the horns of a bull and was holding the prancing animal with one hand while the other rested nonchalantly on his sword. At the toreador's feet lay a huge half unwound reel of white thread with a label marked No. 40.

The room's adornments were completed by an enormous chest bound with strips of tin plate. Evidently Polyanitsa used it as a safe, and a suitably huge and gleaming barndoor padlock indicated that it was a depository for documents of the first importance.

Davidov could not help smiling as he scanned Polyanitsa's office, but Polyanitsa interpreted the smile in his own way.

"Yes, I've made myself comfortable here," he said complacently. "I've kept everything that belonged to the former kulak owner, preserved the room's appearance completely. All I've done is have the bed with its featherbed and pillows moved into the charwoman's room, but by and large, mind you, I've preserved the comfort. No cold officialdom for me! Yes, I must admit I like a bit of domestic atmosphere, I want people to feel easy and at home when they come to see me. That's right, isn't it?"

Davidov shrugged without answering and came straight to the point: "I've got a bone to pick with you, neighbour."

Polyanitsa's cunning little eyes sank deep into folds of flesh and glittered back at Davidov like small bits of anthracite. His thick black brows rose high on his forehead.

"A bone to pick with me, such a thing between good neighbours like us? You alarm me, Davidov! We've always hit it off so well together, and now it's—I've got a bone to pick with you. I simply can't believe it, I just won't!"

Davidov stared hard into Polyanitsa's eyes, but was unable to divine their expression. Polyanitsa's face was as enigmatically good-natured as ever and a calm and welcoming smile had settled on his lips. Apparently the chairman of the Red Ray collective farm was a born

actor, skilled in the art of self-control and no less skilled at playing a part.

"Was it by your order that this hay, our hay, was carted away last night?" Davidov asked bluntly.

Polyanitsa's brows rose even higher.

"What hay, my friend?"

"The usual kind, steppe hay."

"This is the first time I've heard about it! Carted away, you say? Who did it? My people? Impossible! I don't believe it! Shoot me, execute me, I won't believe it! Remember, Semyon, my good friend, that the members of the Red Ray collective farm are exceptionally honest tillers of our socialist fields, and your suspicions are an insult not only to them, but to me as chairman of the collective farm! I beg you, friend, to bear that seriously in mind."

Concealing his irritation, Davidov said: "Look here, you fancy friend, I'm no Litvinov and you're no Chamberlain, and there's no need for us to play at being diplomats. Did you tell them to take that hay?"

"I ask you again, my friend, what hay are you talking about?"

"This is getting like a shaggy dog story!" Davidov burst out indignantly.

"Now, bear this in mind, friend, I am asking you seriously. what hay are you talking about?"

"The hay in Guelder Nook. Our mowing strips run next to each other up there and you simply stole our hay, that's a fact!"

As though delighted at finding the misunderstanding so easily solved, Polyanitsa gave his lean shanks a resounding slap and guffawed loudly.

"But you should have said so to start with, old friend! Going on like that about some hay or other, when the question is, what hay. In Guelder Nook either by mistake or for some reason best known to your-

selves you did some mowing on our land. We carted that hay away on a completely legal basis. Don't you see that, friend?"

"No, my fancy friend, I don't. Why, if it's your hay, did you sneak up and cart it away at night?"

"That's for the team-leader to say. It's better for animals and for people to work at night, it's cooler. So I suppose, that's why they carted it at night. Don't your people work at night? That's a mistake. It's much easier to work at night, specially if it's light, than during the day, in the scorching heat."

Davidov gave a dry laugh. "Right now the nights happen to be very dark, that's a fact!"

"You can still find the way to your mouth even on a dark night, you know."

"Specially if you're guzzling someone else's porridge."

"Now, you just drop that, my friend! Bear this in mind, your insinuations are deeply insulting both to the honest and extremely politically conscious members of the Red Ray, and to me, as their chairman. We're toilers, you know, not thieves, bear that in mind!"

Davidov's eyes flashed but, still keeping himself in check, he said: "Drop your high-falutin talk, my fancy friend, and let's get down to brass tacks. Do you know that this spring three boundary posts were moved in Guelder Nook on both sides of the ravine? Your honest collective farmers moved them, straightened out the boundary and sliced off not less than four or five hectares of our land. Do you know that?"

"My friend! What makes you think so? Your suspicions, you must bear in mind, are a profound insult to the guiltless..."

"Cut out this double talk," Davidov snapped, growing furious in spite of himself. "Do you take me for a sucker? I'm talking to you seriously and you put on

an act and pretend your noble feelings are offended. I called at Guelder Nook on the way here and I checked up myself on what the collective farmers told me. The hay was taken and the posts have been moved, that's a fact! And you won't get away from that fact!"

"But I don't intend getting away from it. Here I am, large as life, take me with your bare hands, but... before you try, you'd better rub some resin on them. Rub it on well, friend, or else, bear this in mind, I'll slip out of them like an eel."

"What the Tubyanskoy men have done is called land-grabbing, and you're the one who's got to answer for it, Polyanitsa!"

"That has yet to be proved, my friend, about the moving of the boundary posts. At the moment it's no more than a bare assertion on your part, my friend. Your hay's not marked, you know."

"Even marked sheep get stolen by wolves."

Polyanitsa gave a faint smile and shook his head reproachfully. "Iut-tut! So now you're comparing us to wolves! Say what you like, but I don't believe anyone could have dug up those posts and moved them."

"Go out and check for yourself. The old marks are still there. The soil's looser and the grass is shorter, and you can see where the ditches round them used to be, as plain as the nose on your face, that's a fact! What do you say to that? If you want to, we'll go there together. Shall we? No, Comrade Polyanitsa, you can't dodge with me! Well, are we going or not?"

Davidov smoked in silence and waited for an answer, Polyanitsa also remained silent, still smiling placidly. It was stuffy in the plant-filled room. Flies beat against the dirty window-panes and buzzed monotonously. Through a gap in the thick, shiny green foliage of a ficus Davidov saw a young prematurely stout but still handsome woman with her short-sleeved night-

dress tucked into an old skirt go out on to the steps of the porch. Shielding her eyes with her hand, she stared down the street and, growing suddenly animated, shouted in an unpleasantly shrill and squeaky voice: "Fenka, you good-for-nothing wench, bring in the calf! Can't you see the cow's come in from the herd?"

Polyanitsa also looked out of the window at the woman's plump milk-white arm bared to the shoulder, and her rich brown curls tumbling from under her kerchief and stirring in the breeze, and for some reason bit his lips and sighed.

"That's the management's charwoman. She lives here and keeps the place clean. She's not a bad woman, but too fond of shouting. I just can't cure her of the habit. . . . There's no need for me to go out in the fields, Davidov. I've been out already and I've seen all I needed to see. And I shan't return the hay, so that's that. It's a disputable case. The surveyors were here five years ago, and it's not for us to sort out this feud between the Tubyanskoy and Gremyachy folk."

"Who should then?"

"The district authorities."

"All right, I agree. Land disputes are one thing, but that hay's got to be returned. We mowed it and it belongs to us."

Evidently Polyanitsa had decided to put an end to what he considered a pointless conversation. He was no longer smiling. The fingers of his right hand, which had been lying limply on the table, stirred slightly and the thumb crept slowly between the first and second fingers. Indicating the combination with his eyes, Polyanitsa for some reason switched cheerfully to his native Ukrainian and said: "See that? That means No! And that's my answer. So good-bye and leave me in peace. Good luck to you!"

Davidov laughed shortly. "You're a queer chap to argue with, I see. Are you so short of words that you have to make signs at me like a market woman? That's no argument, mate. Have I to go and complain about you to the public prosecutor over this perishing hay?"

"Complain to anyone you like! To the prosecutor or the district committee, but I'm not giving up the hay or the land, bear that in mind," Polyanitsa replied, slipping back into Russian.

There was no more to be said. Davidov stood up and eyed him thoughtfully.

"It makes me wonder to look at a man like you, Comrade Polyanitsa. How could you—a worker, a Bolshevik—sink so quickly into the ways of the small property-owner. You started off by boasting about your kulak furniture and telling me you'd preserved the appearance of this room, but if you ask me, you haven't preserved just the appearance of a kulak house, you've kept the smell inside, too, and that's a fact! After six months you stink of it yourself! If you'd been born twenty years earlier, you'd have made a real kulak, I'm telling you that for a fact!"

Polyanitsa shrugged and again buried his small glittering eyes in folds of flesh.

"I don't know whether I'd have made a kulak or not, but you, Davidov, and you can bear this in mind, would have made a priest, or at least, a church warden."

"Why?" Davidov asked in genuine surprise.

"Because you, ex-sailor, have buried yourself up to your neck in religious prejudice. If I were secretary of the district committee, bear this in mind, you'd be putting your Party card on the table for the tricks you've been up to."

"What tricks? What are you talking about?" Davidov hunched his shoulders in amazement.

"Don't play the innocent! You know full well what

I'm talking about. Our whole group here is fighting religion, we've twice brought up the question of closing the church at a general collective-farm meeting and a village meeting, and what are you doing? You put a spoke in our wheel at every turn, that's what you do!"

"Carry on, I'll be interested to know what kind of spokes they are."

"What kind of spokes?" Polyanitsa continued, becoming noticeably roused. "You use collective-farm horses to have old women driven to church on Sundays, that's what you do! And bear this in mind, our women throw that in my face. 'You this and that, they say, you want to close our church down and turn it into a club, but the chairman at Gremyachy is full of respect for women believers, he even has them driven to church on Sunday in a horse-carriage'."

Davidov burst out laughing in spite of himself.

"So that's it! So that's the religious prejudice I'm guilty of? Well, that's nothing very terrible."

"It may not be terrible for you, but there could be nothing worse for us, bear that in mind!" Polyanitsa went on vehemently. "You suck up to the collective farmers and try to please everybody, and in doing so you wreck our anti-religious campaign. A fine Communist, I must say! Accuses other people of small property-owner's habits, and carries on himself like the devil knows what. Where's your political consciousness? Where are your Bolshevik principles and intolerance of religion?"

"Wait a minute, you principled burbler! Take it easy! What do you mean by 'sucking up'? Do you know why I sent the old women in a drozhki? Do you know what my aim was?"

"I don't care a damn about your high-falutin aims! Aim how you like, but don't muck up our aim of fighting the priests. Say what you like, but I'm going to

bring your conduct up before the district committee, bear that in mind!"

"Well, I must say, I thought you had more sense, Polyanitsa," Davidov said regretfully and went out without saying good-bye.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

While still on his way back to Gremyachy Log, Davidov decided not to bring the case of the land-grabbing and theft of hay before the public prosecutor. He did not want to go to the district Party committee about it either. The main thing was to find out definitely to whom the disputed land in Guelder Nook really belonged, and when that was settled, to take action.

Recalling his conversation with Polyanitsa rather bitterly, Davidov reasoned to himself, there's a specimen for you, a lover of plants and domestic comfort! He's not a genius, you'd never say that, he's just got a sort of crude cunning, like most fools. But you've got to be careful how you tackle him. . . . The hay was taken with his consent, of course, but that's not the main thing. The main thing is the posts. Surely they weren't moved on his instructions. He'd never go that far, it's too risky. But suppose he knew they'd been moved and closed his eyes to the fact? That's really bad! His collective farm's only been going six months, and if they start by grabbing their neighbours' land and stealing, they'll go to pieces at once! It's simply pushing them back into their old individual way of life, to the old idea of grabbing as much as you can. No, that won't do! As soon as I sort out just who this land belongs to, I'll go straight to the district committee. Let them give us both a brain-cure—me for the old women, and Po-

lyanitsa for putting harmful ideas into the heads of his collective farmers.

The steady jogging of the horse lulled Davidov into a doze, and suddenly through the mists of sleep he had a vision of the stout woman standing on the steps of the porch in Tubyanskoy. His lips curved in disgust and he thought sleepily, the amount of spare fat and flesh she's got on her. . . . She must go about frothing all over in this heat, that's a fact! And at once his far too obliging memory conjured up, as if for comparison, Lushka's girlishly slim and shapely figure, her sprightly walk, and that hauntingly beautiful gesture of her fine hands with which she would pat her hair into place, looking up from under lowered brows with affectionate and mocking, all-knowing eyes. Davidov shuddered as if from a sudden blow, straightened up in his saddle and, twisting his face as though in acute pain, lashed his horse angrily into a gallop.

Every day of late his unkind memory had been playing cruel tricks on him. At all the wrong moments—in the middle of an important conversation, in moments of meditation, in his dreams—it would resurrect the image of Lushka, whom he longed vainly to forget.

He arrived in Gremyachy at noon. Ostrovnov and the book-keeper were talking animatedly together, but as soon as he opened the door, silence descended on the room as if at a word of command.

Wearied from the heat and the journey, Davidov sat down at the desk and asked: "What was the argument about? Has Nagulnov been to the office?"

"No, he hasn't been in," Ostrovnov replied after a pause and glanced quickly at the book-keeper. "We weren't really arguing, Comrade Davidov, you imagined it. We were just discussing a few things, mostly about the farm. Well, are the Tubyanskoy folk going to give us our hay back?"

"They're asking for more.... Whose land is it in your opinion, Yakov Lukich?"

Ostrovnov shrugged, "Who can tell, Comrade Davidov, it's a fishy business. In the first place, that land was allotted to Tubyanskoy village; that was before the Revolution. But under Soviet power the top half of Guelder Nook was granted to us. In the last survey, in 1926, the Tubyanskoy folk were pushed back a bit farther, but where the boundary was made then I don't know, because my land was on the other side. About two years ago Titok did some mowing there. Whether he just took what was going, or else bought the land on the sly from one of the poor, I couldn't say, I don't know. The best thing to do, I reckon, would be to invite the district land surveyor Comrade Shportnoy to come over. He'll soon work out from the old maps where the boundary used to be. He did the surveying here in 'twenty-six, he's bound to know."

Davidov rubbed his hands joyfully.

"That's fine! Shportnoy will know who the land belongs to, and that's a fact. I thought the surveying had been done by some sort of visiting group of surveyors. Go and find Shchukar right away and tell him to put the stallions in the break and drive to the district centre and fetch Shportnoy. I'll write him a note."

Ostrovnov went out but returned five minutes later smiling into his moustache, and beckoned Davidov with his finger: "Come into the hayloft for a minute and see a miracle."

The management-office yard, like the whole village, was wrapped in that lifeless midday stillness that comes only on the hottest summer days. The air smelled of sun-faded grasses and from the stables drifted the odour of dry horse dung, but when Davidov entered the hayloft his nostrils were assailed by such a heady aroma of fresh-mown grass, dry at the tips but still

flowering, that for a moment it seemed to him as if he were standing in the steppe beside a sweet-smelling hayrick that had just been built.

Ostrovnov carefully opened one of the double doors and stepped aside to admit Davidov, saying in a whisper: "Take a look at this pair of turtle doves. You'd never think that an hour ago they were fighting each other to the death. They seem to have an armistice when they're asleep."

For the first minute, while his eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, Davidov could see nothing but a straight ray of sunlight plunging through a gap in the roof into the pile of hay that was heaped carelessly in the middle of the barn. Then he made out the figure of Grandad Shchukar sleeping in the hay, and beside him Trofim rolled up in a ball.

"All the morning granfer was chasing after the goat with his whip, and now they're sleeping together," Ostrovnov said, no longer bothering to lower his voice.

And Grandad Shchukar awoke. But before he could rise on his elbow, Trofim catapulted himself off the hay with all four legs, jumped to the ground, lowered his head and shook his beard with menacing belligerence.

"D'ye see what a horned devil this is, good folk?" Shchukar asked in hstless, enfeebled tones, indicating the warlike Trofim. "All night long he's been a creepin' about here in the hay, a snortin' and sneezin' and gnashin' his teeth. Not a wink of sleep did he give me, the perishin' creature! How many times have I been a fightin' with him this morning, and then he takes it into his head to creep up here for a snooze—the work of the devil, that was!—and now he's been woken up, he's gettin' ready for a fight, the perisher! How am I supposed to live with such a persecution? It spells murder, that's what this does. Either I'll do him in, or he'll slit my belly with his horns, and that'll be good-

bye to Grandad Shchukar! To cut a long story short, one of us is going to come to a bad end with this horned devil around, there's going to be a corpse in the yard one of these days."

A whip suddenly appeared in Grandad Shchukar's hand, but before he could raise it, Trofim had taken two swift jumps into a dark corner of the barn and defiantly stamping its hooves glowered back at Shchukar with piercing phosphorescent eyes. The old man put his whip aside and shook his head sadly.

"See how crafty he is? I can only keep him off with the whip, and I can't always do that, because the perishing creature lies in wait for me in places where you'd never expect to find him. I have to keep this whip in my hand all round the clock. I can't move without that goat followin' me! And he always turns up just where you don't want him. Take yesterday, for instance. I had to find myself an out-of-the-way corner behind the barn to satisfy a great and urgent need. I looked all round—no goat about. Well, I says to myself, thank the Lord for that, Trofim's takin' a rest somewhere in the`cool, or else he's grazin' outside the yard, havin' a nibble of grass. So with my mind at ease I went behind the barn, and I'd just settled down nicely when there he comes, the devil, marchin' up to me with his head on one side just about to give me a butt in the ribs. It was no good. I had to get up. Well, I drove him off with my whip and I'd only just settled down again, when back he comes round the corner. The number of times he attacked me like that! He put me right off my stroke! What a life, eh! I've got rheumatics in my legs and I'm not very young to keep up knees bendin' and stretchin' like a recruit on the parade ground. It makes me shaky in the legs and gives me pins and needles in the small of my back. Because of that there Trofim, I've ruined my health, so to speak, and I shouldn't wonder if I don't

catch my death in some out-of-the-way spot. I used to be able to perch the whole day long, like an eagle, but now I'll soon have to be askin' someone to hold me up under the armpits. That's the shame that this devilish Trofim has brought me to! Bah!"

Shchukar spat furiously and groped about in the hay muttering to himself and cursing.

"You ought to live in a civilised way and use a lavatory, instead of creeping about round the barns," Davidov advised chuckling.

Shchukar looked at him sadly and made a hopeless gesture.

"I can't! My soul won't let me. I'm not one of your city dwellers. I've been used to satisfyin' my needs in the fresh air all my life, I like to have a breeze round me. Even in the fiercest winter frost, you'd never chase me into one o' them kennels. Why, as soon as I get inside one of your proper places the terrible smell makes me feel all faint and dizzy."

"Well, in that case I can't do anything to help you. You'll have to shift for yourself. But now harness up the stallions in the break and drive over to the stanitsa for the land surveyor. We're in great need of him. Lukich, do you know where Shportnoy's lodgings are?"

Receiving no answer, Davidov glanced round but there was no sign of Ostrovnov. Knowing from experience how long Shchukar could be in getting ready, he had gone to the stables to harness up the horses.

"I can get ready to go to the stanitsa in no time, that's nothin'," Grandad Shchukar declared. "But just explain one thing to me, Comrade Davidov. Why is it that all the former kulak animals take after their old owners in character? Why is it they're so terrible pernicious and cunnin'? Take that devil Trofim, for example. Why hasn't he ever butted, let's say, Yakov

Lukich in the pants instead of tryin' his strength on me all the time? It's because he smells his own kulak breed in him, and so he don't touch him and pours out all his spite on me instead.

"Or take any ex-kulak cow. She'll never give a collective-farm milkmaid as much milk as she used to give her dear old mistress. Mebbe she's right in that, because her old mistress used to feed her on beets and scraps and all kinds of other dainties, whereas the milkmaid just chucks her a handful of mouldy hay and sits a dreamin' under the udder waiting for the milk to come.

"And just you take any ex-kulak dog. Why does he always go only for the poor and ragged? For me, for instance? It's a serious question. I asked Makar about it and he says: 'It's the class struggle.' But what this here class struggle is he didn't explain. He just laughed and went on with his business. But what I says is, to hell with it, this class struggle, if I can't stroll through the village without lookin' over my shoulder at every dog I pass! The damned creature don't have a label to say whether he's an honest dog or one of the dispossessed layers of the population, do he? But if he, seeing as how he's a kulak, is my class enemy, as Makar explains it, what am I supposed to do? Dispossess him! But how would you, for instance, set about dispossessin' him, takin' his fur coat off him while he's still alive, that is? It's impossible! He'll have the skin off you first and no nonsense. So the thing's plain. First you've got to finish this class enemy off, then go for his fur coat. And that's what I suggested as a proposal to Makar. 'At that rate,' he says, 'you'll hang half the dogs in the village, you old fool.' And who's the foolish one, that's what we don't know, that's the question. In my opinion, it's Makar who's a bit screwy himself, not me. . . .

"Does the Purveying Office take dog skins as raw material for tannin"? It does! And how many ex-kulak dogs are there a runnin' about the country without masters or any kind of supervision? Millions of 'em! Then suppose you skinned the lot of 'em, tanned the leather and used the wool for makin' stockings, what would you get? The result would be that half Russia would be goin' about in chrome leather boots, and everybody who wore stockings made of dog's wool would cure himself for the rest of his life of rheumatics. I heard that remedy from my grandma a long time ago, I did, and there's nothin' better, if you want to know. But why waste words, I've suffered from rheumatics myself and it's only my dog-wool stockings that save me. Without them I'd have been a creepin' about on all fours long ago."

"Are you thinking of going to the stanitsa today, grandad?" Davidov enquired.

"Certainly I am, but don't you interrupt me and listen to what else I've got to tell you. Now about this great idea of mine of using dog skin—I couldn't sleep for two nights thinkin' about how much money the state, and myself, in particular, would get out of it. If my hands weren't so shaky, I'd have written to the authorities about it myself. You never know, somethin' might have come off it, I might have got somethin' from the authorities for my mental efforts. And then I decided to tell Makar all about it. I'm not greedy. So I went to see him and put the whole thing before him. 'Makar, old chap,' I says. 'I'm an old man, I've no need of any of this here capital or any rewards, but I want to make you happy for the rest of your life. Write to the central authorities about my idea and you'll get as big a medal for it as you got during the war. And if they give you any cash into the bargain, we'll share it between us in the proper way. If you want to, you can ask

for a medal, but all I need is a cow, or mebbe just enough cash to buy a heifer, and that'll be enough for me.' Any other man would have gone down on his knees and thanked me. But that Makar, he thanked me all right. . . . How he jumped up from his chair! How he swore at me! 'The older you get,' he yells, 'the stupider you become! You've got an empty pot on your shoulders instead of a head!' And after every word, he cursed this way and that way and the other way till the air was so thick a fly couldn't live in it. Passin' remarks about my brains! I like that, I must say! He's a fine one to talk. Smart he thinks he is! Just a dog in a manger! So I sat there waitin' for him to dry up and thinking to myself, let him hop about for a bit. In the end he'll have to sit down on the chair with the same part of his body as he was sitting on before.

"And after a while poor old Makar got tired of cursin' and swearin' and asked: 'Had enough?' Then I lost my temper with him, although we're bosom pals, always have been. 'If you're too puffed to go on,' I says, 'you'd better take a rest and then start all over again I'll wait, I'm in no hurry. But what's all this foolish swearin' for, Makar, old chap? I want to help you. Why, for an idea like mine you'll get your name in all the newspapers in Russia!' But then he slammed the door and ran out of the house as if I'd poured scaldin' water down his breeches!

"In the evenin' I went to schoolmaster Shpyn to talk this thing over; after all he's an educated man, you know. I told him all about it and complained of Makar. But all these learned men, if you ask me, they've got a screw loose somewhere, and a mighty big screw, too! D'you know what he said to me? He pulls a face and says: 'All great men have suffered for their ideas, so you must suffer too, grandad.' That's a fine comfort, eh? He's a twerp, not a teacher! What's the use of suf-

ferings to me? I had a cow nearly in my hands and now I can't even see its tail. . . . And it's all because of Makar's opposition! Calls himself a friend, may he rot! And because of him there's been nothin' but trouble at home. . . . I boasted to my old woman that the Almighty might send us a cow for my mental efforts. Some hopes! And now the old woman's gnawin' away at me like a hacksaw. 'Where's your cow? Another one of your tales!' I have to put up with all kinds of persecution from her too. If all these great men have had to go through it, I reckon I'm one of the chosen.

"And so my good idea was wasted all for nothin'. Still what can you do about it? You can't jump over your own what-you-may-call it, can you?..."

Davidov was leaning on the door-post laughing silently and made no reply, but when Shchukar had calmed down a little he began unhurriedly pulling on his shoes and, no longer paying any attention to Davidov, continued his story:

"But dog-wool stockings are a tip-top remedy against rheumatics! I went all through last winter in them, never took 'em off once, and though my feet nearly rotted by the spring and the old woman turned me out of the house on account of the smell of dogs, I got over my rheumatics and 'went hoppin' about for a whole month, like a cock round a hen. But what was the good of it all? None. Because in the spring I was silly enough to get my feet wet, and that did it! But it won't last long, I'm not so very scared of that disease. As soon as I catch a nice quiet dog with a nice long coat, I'll shear him and my rheumatics will be gone again in a flash! You see how I go about now. Like a geldin' that's had too much barley, but when I've worn my healin' stockings for a bit, I'll be a trippin' it like a young man again. The only trouble is that my old woman won't spin any more dog's wool and make me socks out of

it. The smell of dogs makes her head dizzy and she starts chokin' over the spinnin' wheel. First she starts hiccoughing, then she chokes and chokes till it gets so bad that she brings all her insides up. So, God help her, I don't force her to do that work. I washed that wool myself, I dried it in the sunshine, I span it, and I knitted the stockings. Necessity, my boy, can teach you any dirty job.

"But that's only half the trouble, the main thing is that my old woman is a viper and a vulture combined! Last summer I got a terrible ache in my legs. What was I to do? And then I remembered about dog's wool stockings. And one morning I tempted the neighbours' bitch into the porch, tempted her with dry crusts I did, then shaved all the hair off her like a proper barber. Just left a tuft of hair on each ear for appearance sake, and on the tip of her tail, so she could flick the flies off. You won't believe it, but I took over sixteen pounds of wool off her!"

Davidov covered his face with his hands and, choking with laughter, groaned: "Sounds rather a lot-for a dog?"

But far more awkward questions than that had failed to corner Grandad Shchukar. He shrugged carelessly and made a gracious concession: "Well, mebbe a little less, ten or twelve pounds, say, I never weighed it. That bitch had such a woolly coat, a real Merino sheep she was! I thought the wool I got from her would keep me in stockings till the end of my days. But not a bit of it. I only managed to knit one pair out of it and the old woman got at the rest and burned the lot outside in the yard. She's not a wife, she's a man-eatin' tiger, she is! Dangerous as that triple-cursed Trofim she is. She and Trofim are birds of a feather, honest to God they are! To cut a long story short, she burned up all my supply and ruined me! And to keep that bitch standin'

quiet while I shaved her I'd used up a huge bag of crusts. Yes, that's how it was.

"But that bitch wasn't very lucky either. She ran away from me after the shearin' and she seemed to be pleased I'd freed her from that extra burden of wool, even wagged her tufty tail with pleasure, and then she went rushin' down to the stream, and as soon as she saw her reflection in the water, she started a whinin' with shame. Folk tell me she wandered up and down the stream as if she wanted to drown herself in it. But that stream of ours has got about enough water in it for a sparrow to paddle in, and she never thought of jumpin' down the well, wasn't smart enough for that. But what could you expect from her? After all, she was only an animal, an insect, so to speak. She's only got a little scrap of brain, not like a human bein'.

"Well, for three days runnin' she stayed under our neighbours' shed a whinin' her head off, gave me the willies with her whinin's she did, but she wouldn't come out from under that barn. It must have been her modesty that was makin' her so upset, she was ashamed to show herself in public in such a state. And so she ran away from the village, vanished altogether till late in the autumn, then as soon as she grew a fresh coat, she came back to her master. Such a modest bitch she was. Modester than some women, honest to God she was!

"And since then I've decided that if I have to shave any more dog's meat, I won't touch the bitches, I won't take their clothes off them and offend their maiden modesty. I'll choose one of the he-dogs. They aren't very modest. You could shave one of them with a razor, and he'd never bat an eyelid."

"Will you soon be through with your fairy-tales?" Davidov interrupted. "You've got a journey to make. Get a move on!"

"Just a minute! I'll just put my shoes on and I'll be ready. But don't interrupt me, for the Lord's sake, or my mind will dodge off in another direction and I'll forget what I was talkin' about. Now, as I was sayin', Makar seems to take me for a dim-wit, but he's mighty wrong! He's only a milksop compared to me, a mere chicken, doesn't know any of the tricks of the trade, but I'm an old bird, and you can't catch an old bird like me with chaff, that you can't! It wouldn't do Makar any harm to borrow a few of my brains. And I mean it!"

It was one of Grandad Shchukar's regular attacks of garrulity. Shchukar had got himself "wound up", as Razmyotnov called it, and now it was not merely difficult but almost impossible to stop him. Davidov, who had always treated the luckless old man with a kindly consideration bordering on pity, nevertheless decided that this time his story must be curtailed.

"Hold on, granfer, give it a rest! You've got to make an urgent trip to the stanitsa and bring back Shportnoy the surveyor. Do you know him?"

"Not only do I know your Shportnoy, I know every dog in the stanitsa."

"You're certainly an expert on dogs, that's a fact! But I need Shportnoy. Understand?"

"I've told you I'll bring him here, I'll deliver him like a bride to the churchdoor, and that's that. But don't you interrupt me. What's this terrible habit you've got of interruptin' a fellow? You're gettin' worse than Makar, you really are, Davidov! At least he shot Timofei, he's a heroic Cossack, so let him interrupt me if he likes, I'll respect him just the same. But what heroic deeds have you done? What should I respect you for? There's nothin', nothin' at all! Now if you was to take your revolver and shoot this devil's goat that's ruinin' my life, I'd pray for you till the end of my days, I'd

respect you just as much as Makar. Yes, Makar's a hero! He's mastered all the sciences and now he's learnin' the English language off by heart. He understands everythin' as well as I do. And he's a top judge of cock crowin'. He even turned that Lushka out, who you took under your wing, like a fool, and he finished that rapscaillon Timofei off with a single bullet, too."

"Can't you put your shoes on quicker! What are you hanging about for?" Davidov exclaimed impatiently.

"I'm fastenin' the straps, can't you see?" Grandad Shchukar muttered, grunting and rolling about in the hay. "It's the devil's own job fastenin' straps in the dark."

"Why don't you come out in the light!"

"I'll fasten them here somehow. Yes, that's just what my Makar's like. He not only learns himself, he tries to teach me. . . ."

"What?" Davidov asked grinning.

"All kinds of learnin'," Shchukar answered evasively. He was obviously unwilling to go into details and he repeated reluctantly: "All kinds of learnin', I say. Understand? I've just been havin' a go at foreign words. How's that?"

"I don't get you at all. What foreign words?"

"Well, if you're such a booby, there's no need to ask," Grandad Shchukar replied, beginning to get annoyed, and snorted offensively to show his displeasure.

"You need foreign words, granfer, about as much as a dead man needs a poultice. Just look a bit more lively, will you," Davidov begged, still smiling.

Shchukar swore like an angry cat.

"A bit more lively! The way he talks! You need to be lively when you're catchin' flees or when you're runnin' away at night from somebody else's wife with her husband on your heels. . . . I can't find my whip.

may the plague take it! I had it in my hand a moment ago, and now it's gone and buried itself. I can't move a step without a whip because of that there goat. . . . Ah, thank the Lord, I've found it! Now where's my cap? You haven't seen my cap, have you, Davidov? It was lyin' just by my head. . . . Ah, I've got a memory like a sieve nowadays. . . . Well, thank the Lord, I've found my cap as well. Now I've only got to find my coat and I'm ready. That unclean spirit, Trofim, must have gone and trampled it into the hay. Now I'll be lookin' for it for the rest of the day. . . . Ah, I remember! I left my coat at home. . . . And what do I need it for anyway in heat like this? Why should I bring it here?"

Davidov glanced out of the door and saw Ostrovnov adjusting the bridles of the stallions harnessed to the break. He was stroking them and murmuring something.

"Yakov Lukich has harnessed up already, and you're still getting ready! When will you stop dawdling, you old dawdler?" Davidov exclaimed crossly.

Grandad Shchukar swore loudly and at great length.

"It's such a bad day, damn it! I shouldn't really be goin' to the stanitsa at all. The omens are no good! Look at the way I had to search for my cap, and now I've lost my pouch somewhere. Is that a good omen? I should think not! There'll be trouble on the road, you can be sure. . . . Look at this, I just can't find my pouch anywhere! Perhaps Trofim has swallowed it? Ah, thank the Lord, now I've found it, now I can go. . . . But maybe we'll put off the trip till tomorrow? The omens are all against it, they're as rotten as can be. . . . And in the Scriptures—I've forgotten what chapter of Matthew it is, but what does it matter anyway—in the Scriptures it says: 'If you're a goin' on a journey, traveller, and the omens are bad, stay at home and don't stir a bloody

inch.' Now, Comrade Davidov, take a serious decision. Am I to go or am I not?"

"Get going at once, grandad!" Davidov said sternly.

Sighing but making no argument, Shchukar slid down off the hay, and with the shuffling steps of old age, dragging his whip behind him and glancing apprehensively over his shoulder at the lurking goat, made his way to the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When he had eventually seen Grandad Shchukar off, Davidov decided to go to the school and find out on the spot just what else could be done to brighten up the building for the coming Sunday. He also wanted to have a talk with the village schoolmaster and work out with his help how much and what kind of material would be needed for the repairs, and when to start the job so that it could be completed thoroughly and without undue haste for the beginning of the school year.

In the past few days Davidov had become distinctly aware that the busiest season since his arrival in Gremyachy Log was now approaching. The mowing was not yet finished and already the corn harvest was in the offing. The winter rye was browning visibly; the barley, too, was ripening; weeds were spreading fast and the collective-farm fields of sunflower and maize, enormous in comparison with the former private patches, mutely demanded hoeing; and it would not be very long now before the wheat would have to be cut and garnered.

Before the grain harvest began there was a lot to be done. As much hay as possible had to be carted to the village, the threshing floors had to be prepared for threshing, the task of moving and bringing together the

barns that had formerly belonged to kulaks had to be finished, and the collective farm's one and only steam thresher had to be put in running order. And besides all this, Davidov's shoulders were burdened with many other worries, large and small, and every task demanded his constant and vigilant attention.

Davidov walked up the ancient creaking steps of the wide schoolhouse porch. At the door a barefooted girl, about ten years old, fresh and firm as mulled honey, stepped aside to let him pass.

"Are you one of the pupils, lassie?" Davidov asked kindly.

"Yes," the girl answered quietly and looked up at him with a bold glance.

"Where does the schoolmaster live?"

"He's not at home. He's gone across the river with his wife to water their cabbages."

"What a pity. . . . Is there anyone in school?"

"There's our teacher, Lyudmila Sergeyevna."

"What's she doing there?"

The girl smiled.

"She's teaching the backward ones. She takes them every day after dinner."

"Giving them a hand, is she?"

The girl nodded.

"That's the way!" Davidov said approvingly and entered the semi-darkness of the porch.

From somewhere at the end of a long corridor came the sound of children's voices. As he walked unhurriedly through the empty class-rooms, inspecting them with great interest, Davidov observed through the half-open door of the last room about a dozen diminutive youngsters amply accommodated in the front row of desks, which had been pushed together, and before them a young schoolmistress. Short and slim, with narrow

shoulders and very fair, short curly hair, she looked more like a girl in her teens than a schoolmistress.

It was a long time since Davidov had been inside a class-room and now he was overcome by a strange feeling as he stood at the door, gripping his faded cap in his left hand. Something of his old respect for school, a sweet emotion wafted by brief memories of the distant years of his childhood, awakened within him.

He pushed the door open almost timidly, gave a shy cough and called softly to the teacher: "May I come in?"

"Come in," she responded in a thin girlish voice.

She turned towards him and raised her brows in surprise, then she recognised him and blushed.

"Please, come in."

Davidov bowed awkwardly.

"Good-day to you. Excuse me for interrupting, but I'll only be a minute. . . . It's about repairing the school, I just wanted to have a look at this room, I can wait a bit."

The children stood up and answered his greeting in a disjointed chorus. Davidov glanced at their teacher and the thought flashed through his mind: I'm just like one of those school patrons of the old days, one of the rich, severe-looking kind. . . . This teacher kid is all scared and blushing. What did I have to barge in at a time like this for?

The girl came up to him.

"Please, come in and sit down, Comrade Davidov! I'll finish the lesson in a few minutes. Shall I send for Ivan Nikolayevich?"

"Who's he?"

"Our head teacher—Ivan Nikolayevich Shpyn. Don't you know him?"

"Yes, I do. Don't you bother, I'll wait. Can I stay here while you carry on with the lesson?"

"Of course! Do sit down, Comrade Davidov."

The girl was looking at Davidov and talking to him, but she still could not recover from her embarrassment; she was blushing furiously, even her collar-bones had grown pink, and her ears were scarlet.

That was one of the things Davidov could not bear. He could not bear it, if only because to look at a blushing woman made him blush himself, thus increasing his confusion and embarrassment.

He sat down on the chair that was offered him at a small table, and the girl went away to the window and began to dictate to her pupils syllable by syllable.

"Mum-my is cook-ing. . . Have you written that, children? She is cooking our din-ner. Put a full stop after the word 'dinner'. Now I shall repeat. . ."

When they had written the sentence twice, the children turned to stare curiously at Davidov. With studied dignity he drew his fingers along his upper lip as though stroking his moustache, and gave the children a friendly wink. They smiled; good relations seemed about to establish themselves but the teacher resumed her dictation, breaking the words into syllables as before, and the children bent over their exercise books.

The class-room smelled of sun and dust and stale air. The lilac and acacia shrubs crowded under the windows in the yard gave no shade. As the wind stirred the leaves, blobs of sunlight glided over the broken, pitted floor.

Knitting his brows, Davidov made some calculations: "We'll need at least a couple of cubic metres of deal to replace some of these floor-boards. The window-frames are good, but I must find out about the extra winter ones and what state they're in. And we've got to buy a crate of glass. There's not a spare pane in the store, I reckon. And with kids around it's only natural that windows get broken, that's a fact! It'd be a good thing to get hold of some white paint, and how much would

it take to do the ceilings, the window-frames and the doors? I'll have to find that out from the carpenters. The front porch needs rebuilding. We can do that out of our own timber. Just saw up a couple of willows, and there you are. But the whole job will cost us a pretty penny. The woodshed's got to be rethatched. There's a hell of a lot to be done, and that's a fact! Well, we'll finish with the barns first, then I'll switch the whole carpentry team on to this job. The roof of this building could do with a fresh coat of paint. . . . But where's the money coming from? I'll get it for the school somehow, if it breaks me! And that's a fact! But why should it? We'll sell a pair of those bullocks that have served their time, and there's the money. There'll be a fight with the district executive committee over those bullocks, but otherwise we're stuck. . . . I'll be in hot water if I sell them on the quiet. . . . Anyway I'll risk it. Surely Nesterenko will back me up?"

Davidov pulled out his notebook and wrote: "School. Boards, nails, one crate of glass. Paris green for roof. White paint. Oil. . . ."

He frowned as he wrote the last word, and at that moment a little chewed-up ball of paper sent from a blow-pipe smacked gently on his forehead and stuck there. Davidov started in surprise, and the next moment one of the youngsters gave a titter into his hand. A ripple of laughter flowed over the desks.

"What is going on?" the teacher asked severely.

A restrained silence was the reply.

Davidov picked the paper ball off his forehead and looked round smiling. The children's little heads, blond, brown and black, were bowed over the desks, but not one sunburnt little hand was writing.

"Have you finished, children? Now write the next sentence . . ."

Davidov waited patiently with his laughing eyes fixed on the little bowed heads. Very slowly and furtively one of the boys raised his head and Davidov recognised an old acquaintance of his. That same Fedotka Ushakov whom he had met one day last spring in the fields was regarding him through the narrow slits of his eyes, and his rosy mouth was widening in a huge and irrestrainable smile. Davidov glanced at the sly little face and nearly laughed out loud. Checking himself, however, he tore a sheet from his notebook, popped it in his mouth and began to chew, glancing quickly at the teacher and winking mischievously at Fedotka. The boy stared at him wide-eyed but to conceal his smile kept his hand over his mouth.

Enjoying Fedotka's suspense, Davidov rolled the chewed paper with unhurried care, placed it on the thumbnail of his left hand and screwed up his left eye as if to aim. Fedotka puffed up his cheeks and apprehensively drew his head into his shoulders—the paper ball was by no means a small one and looked heavy. When Davidov, seizing his chance, sent the ball with a light flick of the finger flying towards Fedotka, the boy ducked so hastily that he bumped his forehead hard on the desk. He sat up and stared at the teacher with his eyes popping out in fright and rubbed his reddening forehead. Davidov, shaking with silent laughter, turned away and buried his face in his hands with his usual gesture.

His action had been an unforgivable piece of childishness, of course, and he ought to have realised where he was. Taking a grip on himself, he glanced sheepishly at the teacher, but saw that she, too, had turned away to the window and was also trying to conceal her laughter. Her thin shoulders were shaking and the crumpled handkerchief in her hand was pressed to her eyes to wipe away the tears.

That's a severe school patron for you, Davidov thought. I've wrecked the whole lesson. I'd better get out of here.

Putting on a serious face, he glanced at Fedotka. The little fellow, lively as quicksilver, was fidgeting impatiently in his seat and pointing at his mouth. He parted his lips, and where there had once been a gap Davidov saw two broad bluish-white teeth, not yet fully grown, which looked so appealing in their imperfection that he gave an involuntary chuckle.

He was profoundly happy as he watched the children's faces and their little different-coloured heads bent over the desks, and reflected that once upon a time, long ago, he, too, like Fedotka's little neighbour, had possessed the habit when writing of bending his head very low over the desk and sticking out his tongue as if its every movement should aid him in his arduous task. And again, as in spring, when he first met Fedotka, he thought with a sigh, you'll have an easier life than we did, little chicks, and you're having an easier life now. What did we fight for otherwise? Surely not for you to live as hard as I had to when I was a kid?

He was jolted out of his dreamy mood by Fedotka. Wiggling about at his desk, he attracted Davidov's attention with signs requesting him to show how his teeth were getting on. Davidov took advantage of the teacher's turning away for a moment and, spreading his arms regretfully, bared his teeth. On seeing the familiar gap in Davidov's mouth, Fedotka sniggered into his palm, then his face became one huge smile of complacency. His triumphant air said plainer than any words: "I've beaten you, uncle! My teeth have grown, but yours haven't!"

But a minute later something happened that Davidov would remember for many a day with an inward

shudder. Getting quite out of hand, Fedotka tapped gently on his desk again to attract Davidov's attention, and when Davidov glanced absently in his direction, Fedotka leaned back importantly, pushed his right hand into his trousers pocket and pulled out a grenade, then promptly thrust it back into his pocket. It all happened so quickly that for a moment Davidov could only blink dazedly. Then he began to turn pale.

Where did he get it? Suppose it's primed? He may knock it on his seat, and then. . . . Hell on earth, what am I going to do? he thought in horror, closing his eyes and not feeling the cold beads of perspiration break out on his forehead, neck and chin.

Something must be done at once. But what? Get up and try to take the grenade by force? But suppose the kid got frightened and broke away? Suppose he threw the grenade away, not knowing that it would mean his death and that of many others? No, that was the wrong way to set about it. Davidov firmly rejected that plan. Still keeping his eyes closed, he searched frantically for a solution, while his imagination, independent of his will, obligingly portrayed the yellow flash of an explosion, a brief horrible scream and mutilated children's bodies.

Then he became aware of the beads of sweat slowly rolling down his forehead, over the bridge of his nose, tickling the sockets of his eyes. As he groped in his pocket for a handkerchief, he came across a penknife which a friend had given him many years ago. The idea came to him in a flash. With one hand he pulled out the penknife and with the sleeve of the other wiped the abundant perspiration from his forehead. Then he began to examine the knife, turning it over and looking at it with the curiosity of one who had never seen such an object in his life. Now and then he shot a glance at Fedotka.

The knife was an old one and very worn, but the strips of mother of pearl on the haft gleamed dully in the sun, and besides its two blades it had a screwdriver and a corkscrew and also a wonderful little pair of scissors. Davidov revealed all these riches one after the other, shooting occasional quick glances at Fedotka. The boy kept his eyes fixed on the knife in enchantment. It was not just a knife, it was a treasure! He had never seen anything so beautiful. But when Davidov tore a clean page out of his notebook and, working rapidly with the scissors, cut out a horse's head, Fedotka's admiration knew no bounds!

Presently the lesson was over. Davidov went up to Fedotka and asked in a whisper: "See my knife?"

Fedotka swallowed hard and nodded.

Bending over him, Davidov whispered: "Want to swop?"

"What for?"

"My knife for that chunk of iron you've got in your pocket."

Fedotka nodded his consent with such desperate determination that Davidov had to hold his chin to stop him. He pushed the knife into Fedotka's hand and carefully accepted the grenade in his own. There was no fuse in it and Davidov, breathing hard with excitement, straightened up.

"You two have some secrets, I see," the teacher said smiling as she walked by.

"We're old friends and we haven't seen each other for a long time. . . . You must excuse us, Lyudmila Sergeyevna," Davidov said respectfully.

"I'm glad you've been present at one of my lessons," the girl said blushing.

Not noticing her confusion, Davidov said: "Please, tell Comrade Shpyn to come and see me at the management office this evening, and before he comes, ask him

to think over how much repair the school needs and what it will cost. Will you?"

"Very well, I'll tell him everything. Won't you be coming in to see us any more?"

"I'll certainly look in when I've got a spare minute, and that's a fact!" Davidov assured her, and without any apparent connection with what they were talking about, added: "Where do you live?"

"At Granny Agafya Gavrilovna's. Do you know her?"

"Yes, I do. How big's your family?"

"My mother and two little brothers live in Novocherkassk. But why are you asking all this?"

"Well, I must know something about you. I'm not asking you to tell me your secrets," Davidov retorted lightly.

Over by the porch Fedotka was hemmed in by a crowd of youngsters eagerly examining the knife. Davidov called the happy owner aside and asked: "Where did you find your toy, Fedot Demidovich? Do you know the spot?"

"Shall I show you, uncle?"

"Yes, I want to see it."

"Come on. Come with me now or I shan't have time later," Fedotka proposed in a business-like manner.

He squeezed Davidov's forefinger in his fist and, obviously proud to be leading not just any grown-up but the chairman of the collective farm himself, strutted off down the street looking round now and then at his schoolmates.

They walked on at a leisurely pace, exchanging brief remarks from time to time.

"You won't want to swop back?" Fedotka asked, running ahead a little and looking up anxiously into Davidov's eyes.

"Certainly not! We've made our bargain," Davidov reassured him.

For about five minutes they walked on in manly silence, then Fedotka gave in and, without releasing Davidov's hand, ran ahead a little and, looking up at him, asked sympathetically: "Aren't you sorry about the knife? Aren't you sorry you swopped it?"

"Not a bit!" Davidov said firmly.

And again they went on in silence. But there seemed to be something gnawing away at Fedotka's small heart. Evidently he considered the exchange very much to Davidov's disadvantage, for after a long silence he said: "Do you want me to give you my catapult as well? Do you?"

With an incomprehensible and reckless generosity that Fedotka could not grasp, Davidov refused. "No, why should I? You keep your catapult. It was a clean swop, wasn't it?"

"What do you mean 'clean'?"

"Well, equal, understand?"

No, Fedotka did not understand at all. He was puzzled and even put on his guard by the light-mindedness that this grown-up had shown in bargaining. A lovely knife that gleamed in the sunshine in exchange for a round chunk of iron that was no good for anything—no, there must be a catch somewhere! Presently the practical Fedotka made another suggestion: "Well, if you don't want the catapult, would you like my skittles? Wait till you see them! They're nearly brand new!"

"No, I don't need your skittles either," Davidov said sighing and chuckling. "If it had been a bit more than twenty years ago, I wouldn't have refused the skittles, old chap. I'd have had them off you in a jiffy, but now it doesn't matter, Fedot Demidovich! What are you worrying for? That knife is yours and you can keep it, and that's a fact!"

Again there was silence. And again after a few minutes came another question: "Uncle, that round thing I gave you, what's it from? A winnower?"

"Where did you find it?"

"In the barn where we're going now, under a winnower. It was ever such an old winnower, the one that's lying on its side all broken. It was under there. We were playing at hide-and-seek and I went to hide and that round thing was lying there. So I took it."

"It must be from the winnower then. You didn't see a little metal rod lying about near by, did you?"

"No, there wasn't anything else there."

Thank the Lord you didn't, or you'd have made a mess that couldn't be cleared up even in the next world, Davidov reflected.

"You need that thing from the winnower very much, do you?" Fedotka enquired.

"Yes, I do, very much."

"It's for the farm, is it? For another winnower?"

"That's it."

After a brief pause Fedotka said in a deep voice: "Well, if you need it for the farm, you did right to swop, you needn't be sorry, and you can buy yourself another knife later on."

Having reached this conclusion, little Fedotka, reasonable beyond his years, smiled with relief. Now, it seemed, his mind was at rest.

That was really all they had to say to each other during their walk, but it placed a kind of seal on their bargain.

Now Davidov knew without a shadow of doubt where Fedotka was taking him, and when the outhouses that had once belonged to Timofei's father showed up on the left down a sidestreet, he pointed at a rush-thatched shed and asked: "That's where you found it?"

"What a good guesser you are, uncle!" Fedotka exclaimed admiringly and let go of Davidov's finger. "Now you'll find the way without me. I'll run off, I'm in ever such a hurry!"

Taking the small hand in his and shaking it as he would a grown man's, Davidov said: "Thank you, Fedot Demidovich, for bringing me to the right place. Drop in and see me some time, or I'll be missing you. I live all by myself."

"All right, I will one day," Fedotka promised condescendingly.

Then he span round on one leg, gave a shrill whistle through two fingers, evidently to summon his friends, and set off at such a pace that his little black heels could scarcely be seen for dust.

Skirting the Damaskovs' yard, Davidov walked to the management office. In the semi-dark room where the management board usually held its meetings, Ostrovnov and the storekeeper were playing draughts. Davidov sat down at the table and wrote on a sheet torn from his notebook: "Store Manager Y. L. Ostrovnov. Supply school-teacher L. S. Yegorova with 32 kilos ground flour, 8 kilos wheatmeal, 5 kilos pork fat and charge them to my account." When he had signed the order, Davidov rested his chin on his fist and sat silently thoughtful for a while, then asked Ostrovnov: "How's that girl, our school-teacher, Lyudmila Yegorova, getting along?"

"Lives from hand to mouth," Ostrovnov replied briefly, moving a piece.

"I've just been down to the school inquiring about the repairs. I had a look at that girl. . . . She's so thin, you can nearly see through her like an autumn leaf. Doesn't get enough to eat, I reckon. See that her landlady is sent everything I've put down here today! I'll check up tomorrow. D'ye hear?!"

Davidov left the chit on the table and went straight to see Shaly, the smith.

As soon as he had gone, Ostrovnov swept the draughts together on the board and thumbed over his shoulder at the door. "There's a randy dog for you, eh? First it's Lushka Nagulnova, then it's Varya Kharlamova, and now he's switched over to the school-teacher. And he feeds all his bitches at the farm's expense. . . . He'll strip us bare with his women!"

"He never gave Kharlamova anything, and what he's given the teacher is at his own expense," the storekeeper objected.

But Ostrovnov smiled condescendingly. "I reckon he pays Varya in cash, but the farm will pay for what the teacher gets. And the amount of grub I took Lushka on the quiet by his orders! You'd be surprised!"

Right up to the death of Timofei the Torn, Ostrovnov had supplied him and Lushka liberally from the collective-farm stores, but to the storekeeper he would say: "Davidov gave me strict orders to give Lushka all the grub she fancied. He even threatened me. 'If you or the storekeeper breathe a word about it, you go straight to Siberia!'" So just you keep quiet, my lad, and hand out the flour, fat and honey without weighing it. It's not our job to question the boss."

And the storekeeper gave Ostrovnov everything he asked for, and on his advice slyly cheated the team-leaders to hide the inroads he was making in the stores.

After all, why shouldn't Ostrovnov use this convenient opportunity of blackening Davidov's name?

Lacking anything better to do, Ostrovnov and the storekeeper passed the time pulling Davidov, Nagulnov and Razmyotnov to pieces.

Meanwhile Davidov and Shaly were acting. To admit more light into the shed, Davidov climbed on the roof and pulled two rows of thatch off it with a pitch-fork.

"How's that, old chap, can you see any better?" he called.

"Don't pull the roof down! It's light as day in here now," Shaly responded from inside the shed.

Davidov took a few steps along the main beam and jumped lightly to the soft mulchy floor.

"Where shall we start from, Ippolit Sidorovich?"

"It's best to begin at the beginning, so we'd better start from the wall," the old blacksmith grunted.

Armed with long iron dibbers Shaly had hastily hammered out in the forge, they worked their way together across the shed, plunging the dibbers deep into the earthen floor as they slowly approached the winnower that lay on its side by the opposite wall. A few paces from the winnower Davidov's dibber sank into the earth a'lmost to the handle and there was a dull metallic clink.

"There's your treasure-trove," Shaly said with a chuckle, picking up a spade.

"Let me do the digging, Ippolit Sidorovich, I'm younger."

A metre down he uncovered a heavy bundle. It was a Maxim gun carefully wrapped in greased tarpaulin. They dragged it out of the pit together, unwrapped the tarpaulin in silence, exchanged silent glances, and in silence began to smoke.

After a couple of draws Shaly said: "The Torns meant to take a real poke at Soviet power."

"They certainly took loving care of their gun. Not a speck of rust anywhere, just put a belt in and fire! Wait a bit, let me have another feel around in that pit, perhaps we'll find something else. . . ."

Half an hour later Davidov carefully placed four metal cases containing ammunition belts, a rifle, an opened case of rifle cartridges, and eight hand-grenades with their fuses wrapped up in a half-rotted strip of oil-cloth. In the part of the hole that extended under the stone wall lay an empty home-made case. Judging by its length, it had once contained a rifle.

Davidov and Shaly were busy till sunset stripping down the machine-gun in the forge, cleaning its parts and oiling it. As the evening twilight settled gently over Gremyachy Log the gun spoke aggressively. One long burst, then two short ones, then another long one—and again there was stillness over the village and over the languid steppe, resting from the heat of the day amid the heady scents of faded grasses and sun-warmed earth.

Davidov rose to his feet and said quietly: "Nice job! Fine bit of work!"

"Let's go straight to Ostrovnov's this minute," Shaly growled. "We'll take our dibbers and go all over his yard and outhouses with them. And we'll search the house from top to bottom. We've let him play his little games long enough!"

"You've gone clean crazy, man!" Davidov responded coldly. "Who'd give us permission to make such searches and stir up the whole village? No, you're out of your mind, and that's a fact!"

"If we've found a machine-gun at the Torns', we'll find a six-pounder hidden away somewhere at Ostrovnov's! And it's not me who's mad but you who is making a clever fool of yourself, I'm telling you straight! Just you wait, Yakov Lukich will dig up his gun and start blazing away point-blank at your lodgings, then that will be a fact."

Davidov burst out laughing and tried to put his arm

round the old man, but Shaly turned away, spat furiously and without a word of farewell, strode away to the village, muttering curses.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

In recent times, as always, in fact, Grandad Shchukar had been positively unlucky in everything he undertook, but today of all days had been so completely interwoven with disappointments, great and small, and even disasters, that by the end of it Shchukar, utterly overwhelmed by the multitude of troubles that had fallen to his lot, felt even more superstitious than he had ever felt before. No, he should never have given in to Davidov so rashly and undertaken a journey to the district centre when all the signs had been so plainly against it right from the start of the day.

Shchukar had not driven the length of more than two rows of cottages from the management office when he reined in his horses in the middle of the road and, sitting hunched disconsolately in the break, froze into an attitude of profound contemplation. And indeed he had much to contemplate. Before daybreak he had dreamed that a piebald wolf was chasing him. Now, why should it have been piebald? And why did it have to come a chasin' after me? As if there wasn't anyone else in the world! Why couldn't it have gone a chasin' after someone else, a young, nippy fellow, and I'd have stood by and looked on. Am I to put up with all the world's troubles even in my sleep? No fear, that's not my idea of fun! When I woke up, my heart was a thump-in' and a pumpin' as if it wanted to jump out of my mouth. A great pleasure to have a dream like that, I don't think! And why did that wolf have to be piebald all over instead of being natural grey? Was that a good

sign? Not on your life! That was the rottenest sign you could get, so this here trip's going to land me in the soup, bound to. And what happened when I wasn't sleepin'? First I couldn't find my cap, then my pouch, then my coat.... They weren't very hopeful signs either. No, I should never have given in to Davidov the way I did, I should never have taken one step out of that barn! And with these gloomy reflections Shchukar gazed absently at the empty street, the calves lying in the shade of the fences, and the sparrows hopping about in the roadside dust.

He had almost decided to turn back, but the thought of his recent clash with Davidov made him change his mind. Then, as today, pursued by ill omens, he had flatly refused to drive Davidov out to the first team's camp. His excuse was a horrible dream he had had the night before, and suddenly Davidov's kindly, almost affectionate eyes had acquired an icy glitter. Shchukar had lost his nerve and said, blinking imploringly: "Semyon, my darling boy! Take them needles out of your eyes, can't you! They look like a chained-up dog's, they're so prickly and fierce. You know what a rotten opinion I've got of them pests that are kept on chains and go a barkin' and a growlin' after honest folk. Why should we quarrel? Let's get goin', drat you, if you're so mighty obstinate. But if anythin' happens to us on the road, I'm not goin' to answer for it."

At this sally Davidov had laughed heartily and his eyes had immediately recovered their former kindly twinkle. He slapped Shchukar's wizened hollow-sounding back with his heavy hand and said: "That's the proper way to talk, and that's a fact! Come on, old chap, I'll answer to your old woman for your complete safety, and you needn't worry about me."

Remembering all this, Grandad Shchukar smiled and without further hesitation touched up the horses with

his reins. Yes, I'll go to the stanitsa! To hell with the omens, drat 'em all. If anythin' happens, let Davidov answer. I'm not goin' to answer for any nasty mess I may get into on the road. And anyhow Davidov's been a good lad to me, I'd better not make him angry.

The bitterish smoke of dung-straw fuel still hung over the village, indicating that the housewives had finished their morning's cooking, a light breeze carried the insipid scent of flowering goose-foot across the road, and from the cowsheds, as Grandad Shchukar drove past, came the familiar smell of cow dung and fresh milk that he had known since childhood. Screwing up his eyes short-sightedly and stroking his straggling little beard in his usual fashion, the old man looked around at the simple scenes of village life that were so dear to his heart; once he even overcame his laziness sufficiently to wave his whip and frighten away some sparrows locked in zealous combat in the path of his wheels, but as he was driving past Antip Grach's yard his nostrils caught the smell of fresh-baked bread made even more tantalising by the aroma of the burned cabbage leaves on which the women of Gremyachy usually baked their loaves, and it was only then that he remembered that he had not eaten since noon on the previous day and he suddenly felt so hungry that his toothless mouth immediately began to water and a hollow, gnawing sensation gripped his belly.

Wheeling his horses sharply into a sidestreet, Shchukar headed them towards his cottage with the intention of picking up something to chew before he set out for the stanitsa. From a distance he saw that there was no smoke rising from the chimney. The old woman must have finished her cooking and be taking a nap, he thought to himself smiling contentedly. Lives like a princess with me, she does. No worries or troubles to bother her. . . .

Grandad Shchukar needed very little to transport him from a state of discontent and woeful meditation to one of good-natured complacency. Such was the chiidish spontaneity of his nature. Twitching the reins lazily he thought, why is it she has such a life, like a little bird in heaven? Thanks to me, of course! I was quite right to kill the calf last winter, indeed to God I was! See what a life of ease my old woman leads now without a calf. As soon as she's done her cookin', off she goes and takes a nap. But if I hadn't killed that calf, it'd be a cow by now and that'd mean gettin' up at the crack of dawn and milkin' her, the perishing creature, and drivin' her out to the herd. And durin' the day she'd get restless and come gallopin' home to get away from the gadflies. Then you'd have to drive her out again, and then there'd be gettin' her fodder ready for the winter, and cleanin' out the cowshed, and thatchin' the roof with rushes or straw.... All that bother! And puttin' paid to them sheep was even more correct on my part. Just think of drivin' them out to pasture and worryin' about them, curse their souls, in case they break away from the flock and get snatched by a wolf! And now there's no need for me to worry my heart out about such rubbish. In my long life I've worried it quite enough as it is, it must be as full of holes as an old footcloth, my heart must. And we haven't got a pig in our yard any more either, and that's quite right, too! What's the good of a pig to me anyway, may I ask? To start with, I get heartburn from pork fat when I have too much of it, and secondly, what would I have to feed the creature on, when I haven't got more than a couple of handfuls of flour to live on myself? That pig would be a dyin' of hunger and givin' me the creeps with its squealin'. And anyhow a pig's a seedy kind of animal. Either it gets the plague or else it gets all kinds of sores all over it. When you buy something as

rotten as that, you can be sure it'll peg out the same day or the day after. And the stink it makes all over the yard, you can hardly breathe! But without a pig I've got fresh air all around me, and I can smell the grass, and the vegetables on the vegetable patch, and the wild hemp, and so on. Yes, I love fresh air, sinner that I am! I'd see any pig or swine damned in hell before I'd make a martyr of myself looking after it! We've got two clean little hens and a neat little cock in the yard, and that'll be enough livestock to last me and the old woman the rest of our lives. Let the young ones get rich, we don't need none of their riches, I'll be blowed if we do. And Makar approves of me, too. "You, granfer," he says, "have become a pure proletarian and you've done well to give up your small property." And when I heard him say that, I gives a heartfelt sigh and says: "Mebbe it's very nice to be considered a proletarian but I won't agree to live all my lite on kvass and soup with no meat in it. Good luck to the proletarians, but if we don't get some meat for our work-day units, or a bit o' fat, say, to put in our soup, I may easily give up the ghost by the time winter comes around. And then what good will the title of proletarian be to me? In the autumn I'll see what my work-day unit amounts to, and if it's not enough, I'll go straight back to a bit of small property again."

Grandad Shchukar closed his eyes thoughtfully and said out loud: "Yes, we have a lot to put up with in this upset kind of life we lead. Everything's goin' on new lines, but everything's so funny and strange, and full of new twists and turns, 'like a good dancer."

He tethered the horses to the fence, opened the rickety gate and with the slow and ponderous tread of a true master of the house walked up the weed-grown path to the porch of his cottage.

The kitchen was in semi-darkness and the door into the best room was closed. Grandad Shchukar placed on the bench his peaked cap, which was greasy and flat as a pancake, and the whip which thanks to Trofim he never abandoned for a minute, glanced round and called out: "Hi there, old girl! You still alive?"

A feeble voice answered from the best room: "Only just. . . . I've been lying here since last night, I can't lift my head. Every bone in my body's aching and I feel so shivery I can't get warm even under my big coat. It must be a fever I've caught. . . . And what are you doing here, old man?"

Shchukar threw open the door of the best room and halted on the threshold.

"I'm goin' off to the stanitsa, I dropped in to have a bite before I start."

"What would you be going there for?"

Shchukar stroked his beard with dignity, and with a show of reluctance replied: "It's a serious mission. I'm goin' to fetch the land surveyor. 'If you can't find him for me, grandad,' Davidov says to me, 'no one else can.' You see," Shchukar explained, "there's only one land surveyor in the whole district, and he's an acquaintance of mine, that Shportnoy is, so he'll come if I asks him." Then he switched at once to a business-like tone: "Get me somethin' to eat, time won't wait."

The old woman's groans increased: "Oh dear, oh dear! What am I to feed you with? I haven't lighted the fire or done any cooking today. Go and pick some fresh cucumbers in the garden, and there's some sour milk in the cellar, our neighbour brought it yesterday."

Grandad Shchukar listened to his better half with concealed contempt and finally gave a snort of indignation:

"Fresh cucumbers and sour milk! You must have gone stark staring mad, you old astrolabe! What are

you after? Do you want me to lose every scrap of dignity I possess? You know I've got a terrible weak stomach, and that kind of food will turn my inside to water on the road, then what shall I do when I get to the stanitsa? Carry my trousers in my hand? Why, I can't leave those horses one instant, so what shall I do? Lose the last of my dignity in the middle of the street? No, thank you very much! You can eat your cucumbers yourself and choke them down with sour milk, but I'm not riskin' it! My job's a serious one, I drive Comrade Davidov himself, and it's not for me to take risks with cucumbers. Do you understand, you old approbation?"

A suspicious creaking from the rickety wooden bed at once put Grandad Shchukar on his guard. Before he could finish his lecture a striking change came over the old woman. She sprang vigorously from her bed and advanced upon him with her hands on her hips, filled with indignation and resolve. Her once feeble voice acquired an almost metallic ring and with a vigorous tug at her crumpled kerchief she began her oration:

"You old tree-stump, did you want me to treat you to good meat-and-cabbage soup? Or perhaps you thought you'd fancy some pancakes and clotted cream? Where can I get it all from if there's nothing in your pantry except mice, and they're starving to death anyway! And how much longer will you go on insulting me with these unheard-of words? What do you mean by calling me an astrolabe and a 'probbation? That Makar Nagulnov has taught you to read these disgusting books, and you let him do it, you fool! I'm an honest wife and I've lived honestly with you, you tottering old snot, all my life, and now you go calling me all the names you can think of in my old age!"

Events had taken an unexpected and ominous turn for Shchukar, and he decided to retreat to the depths

of the kitchen. Backing away skilfully, he said appeasingly: "Now, that's enough, that's enough, old woman! They weren't swear-words at all, they're sort of affectionate in scientific language. It's just the same to say 'astrolabe' as it is to say 'my darling?'. . . And if you say 'dearest' in the ordinary way, the book way of saying it is 'approbation'. Honest to God, I'm not telling a lie, that's what was written in the big book Makar gave me to read, I read it there with my own eyes, and you start thinking the devil knows what! There's the complete abolition of illiteracy for you! You've got to study as I do, then you'll be able to chuck words around like I can, and that's a fact!"

Such was the power of conviction in Grandad Shchukar's voice that the old woman cooled down, but still eyeing her husband closely, she said with a sigh: "It's too late for me to start studying now, and there's no need either. You ought to speak your own language, you old polecat. People laugh at you as if you were a proper ninny, they do to be sure!"

"Some people can't help it," Shchukar said haughtily but pursued the argument no further.

He carefully crumbled a stale crust of bread into a small bowl of sour milk and ate slowly and earnestly, looking out of the window now and then and thinking to himself, what the devil should I hurry to the stanitsa for? It's when a man takes it into his head to die and he has to get the priest's blessing that you have to hurry. But Shportnoy is a land surveyor not a priest, and Davidov ain't goin' to die, so why the blazes should I rush myself off my legs? We'll all be in time for the next world, no one's ever had to queue up for that place yet. . . . So when I've driven out of the vilage, I'll turn off into a little ravine where not a living soul can see me, and I'll have a good long nap, and the horses can have a nibble of grass while I rest. By eve-

ning I'll get to Dubtsov's camp and Darya Kupriyanovna will be sure to give me supper, then I'll drive on to the stanitsa by night in the cool. And if, God forbid, Davidov should get wind of it, I'll tell him straight out: 'Get rid of your triple-cursed goat Trofim, then I won't sleep on the road. He was a caperin' around all night beside me in the hay, so how could a fellow sleep? Sheer misery it was!'

Cheered by the prospect of paying a visit to Dubtsov, Shchukar began to smile, but even then his wife managed to spoil his mood. "Why do you chew as if you'd got lock-jaw? If you've been sent somewhere, don't creep around here like a beetle in a dung heap. Get a move on, man. And put those stupid bookish words out of your head and never mention them again to me, or I'll be taking a stick to your back, remember that, you old fool!"

"There's two ends to a stick," Shchukar mumbled inaudibly.

But noticing the angry wrinkles gathering on the face of his majestic wife, he gulped down his milk and took his leave.

"Just you lie there, my dear, don't get up for nothin', and be ill to your heart's content, I'm off."

"God-speed!" his old woman wished him without much affection and turned her back on him.

For about six kilometres, from the village to the mouth of Red Ravine, Shchukar drove at a walking pace, dozing sweetly and nodding his head from time to time. In the end he became so innervated by the midday heat that he nearly fell off the break. I'll be taking a tumble if I don't look out, he thought in alarm and turned off into the ravine.

The bottom of the ravine was deep in spicily fragrant unmown grass. A spring flowed down a clayey runnel from somewhere higher up the ravine. Its water

was transparently clear and so cold that even the horses drank in slow short sips, filtering it carefully through their teeth. The bank of the stream lay in deep shade that even the midday sun could not penetrate. Here's a grand spot, Shchukar thought as he unharnessed the horses. When he had hobbled them and let them out to graze, he spread his old coat under a thornbush and lay down on his back, looking up at the pallid, heat-bleached sky with his age-bleached, light-blue eyes, and gave himself up to worldly thoughts.

Well, you couldn't prick me out of a snug spot like this till evening with a needle. I'll have a glorious snooze and warm my old bones in the sunshine, then pay Dubtsov a visit and have some porridge there. I'll say I didn't have time to have any breakfast at home, and they'll be bound to feed me, that's a dead cert', that is! And I shouldn't think they'll be havin' just thin porridge up at the camp or scrapin' the pot for scraps. Dubtsov's not the kind of fellow to fast at mowing time. That pock-marked old rascal don't live a day without meat, I reckon. He'd pinch a sheep from someone else's flock and feed his team on it! . . . Ah, a nice chunk of lamb, about four pounds of it, say, for dinner, that wouldn't make a bad meal! Particular if it's roasted with a nice bit of fat. Or if it comes to that, bacon and eggs wouldn't be bad either, only plenty of 'em. . . . And then there's dumplings and sour cream, that's a holy dish, better than any sacrament, particu'ar when they put the little darlings on your plate and then add some more till they make a big pile, then shake the plate gentle-like to let the cream trickle right down to the bottom and cover every dumpling from head to foot. And it's even better when them dumplings aren't on a plate but in a nice deep bowl so that there's more room for them and for the spoon!

Grandad Shchukar had never been a glutton, he was simply hungry. In the course of his long and unfortunate life he had rarely eaten a square meal, and it was only in his dreams that he gorged himself on what seemed to him the tastiest of dishes. Sometimes he would dream that he was eating boiled lamb tripe, sometimes he would imagine himself rolling up a huge puffy pancake, dipping it in cream and popping it into his mouth, and sometimes he would be tirelessly gulping down hot noodle soup with goose giblets. . . . In fact there was no end to what he dreamed during nights that were as long as those of any hungry man, but he would always wake up after such dreams sad and sometimes even cross, and say to himself, what a lot of rubbish you dream about sometimes! Life's just a mockery. In your sleep you sit there tucking into a lovely plate of noodles as if you could never stop, and when you wake up, all your old woman shoves at you is black bread and water with a bit of onion, damn the nasty stuff.

After such dreams Shchukar would quietly lick his dry lips till breakfast-time, and over his scanty breakfast he would sigh miserably and make feeble efforts with his chipped wooden spoon to find the lumps of potato in his bowl.

As he lay under the bush Shchukar thought for a long time of what there might be for dinner up at the team's camp, and then, of course, he had to go and remember what a feed he had had at the funeral feast for Ostrovnov's mother and, having worn himself out with reminiscences of food he had once eaten, he suddenly became aware of such an acute attack of hunger that his drowsiness vanished as if by magic and he spat furiously, wiped his beard and began to feel his sunken belly. Then he said aloud: "A crust of bread and a mug of sour milk—is that a meal for a producer? It's no

better than air! An hour ago my belly was tight as a Gypsy's tambourine, but now? Now it's got stuck to my spine. Lord above! You spend all your life thinkin' about a bit of daily bread, of how to fill up your stomach somehow, and life trickles away through your fingers like water, and you don't notice how soon it gets near the end. . . . How long is it since I was in this Red Ravine last? The thorn bushes were all in bloom then, the whole ravine was a foamin' with white spray! And when the wind blew the sweet white blossom went whirlin' around like snow in a blizzard. The path along the bottom was covered in white and it smelled better than any woman's face cream. But now that spring blossom's withered and vanished, vanished for good and all. And that's how my good-for-nothing life has withered in my old age, and soon poor old Shchukar will have to put his worn-out old hooves up on the shelf, there's nothin' else for it. . . ."

At this point Grandad Shchukar's philosophically lyrical meditations came to an end. Overcome with pity for himself, he wept a little, blew his nose, wiped his red eyes on the sleeve of his shirt and fell into a doze. Sad thoughts always made him drowsy.

Even as he dropped off, still true to character, he smiled with gratification, screwed up his eyes blissfully and thought through the mists of sleep: Dubtsov's team is bound to have fresh mutton for dinner, I feel it in my bones! Of course, I won't be able to tackle four pounds at one sitting, I was a bit hasty there and went over the mark, but three pounds, or three and a half, say—I can manage that without blinking an eye. As long as that mutton's on the table, Shchukar won't miss it. It'll find its way to his mouth all right, you can be sure!

At about three o'clock the heat reached its peak. A dry hot wind sprang up in the east and blew scorching

air into the ravine till not a breath remained of its former shady cool. And as the sun moved westward it seemed to pursue Shchukar, who was sleeping on his belly with his face buried in his rolled-up coat. As soon as the sun's rays began first to grope at, then to penetrate his ragged shirt and prick his lean old back, he would wriggle half asleep into the shade; but a few minutes later the persistent sun would again begin to burn the old man's back and Shchukar would again have to wriggle away. In three hours he wriggled half way round the not very large bush without waking up. Eventually, however, exhausted by the heat, puffy-faced and streaming with perspiration, he awoke, sat up, glared at the sun, shading his eyes with his hand, and thought indignantly, there's the eye of God for you, may the Lord forgive me, you can't escape from it even under a bush! Makin' me go round and round that bush like a hare the whole afternoon. Call that sleep? It's not sleep, it's punishment! I ought to have lain down under the break, but that eye of God would have found me even there, there's no gettin' away from it in the open steppe, I'll be blowed if there is!

Grunting and sighing, he unhurriedly removed his hopelessly worn shoes, rolled up his trousers and for a long time surveyed his withered legs, smiling critically and at the same time sadly shaking his head. Then he went down to the stream to wash himself and cool his sweating face with the icy water.

And at that moment he ran into a whole series of misfortunes.

He had scarcely taken two paces through the stunted rushes to the clear water in the middle of the stream, when he suddenly felt his left heel descend on something slippery and cold, and at once felt a slight prick just above his ankle. With unaccustomed agility Granddad Shchukar plucked his left leg out of the water and

stood perched on the other, like a crane in the middle of a marsh. But when he saw the rushes quiver a little to his left, forming a sinuous trail, his face turned as green as those rushes and his eyes slowly bulged from their sockets.

Where did the old man find his unwonted sprightliness? It was as if long-vanished youth had suddenly returned. In two bounds he reached the bank, flopped down on a clay hummock and began carefully examining two tiny red marks on his foot, and occasionally shifting his frightened gaze to the ill-omened stream.

As his first attack of fear gradually passed off, he recovered his power of reason and whispered to himself: "Now it's started, so help me God. That's what those cursed omens meant, blast them! I told that block-head Davidov I shouldn't risk drivin' to the stanitsa today. But no, once he'd got it into his head, I had to go. And now I'm done for. He often tells you: 'I'm a member of the working class.' But what makes this working class so stubborn? Once he takes an idea into his head, you can rest assured he won't get off your back till you're dead or he's got what he's after! Well, now the son-of-a-bitch has done it all right, and now what am I to do?"

Then Grandad Shchukar suddenly had an idea. I'd better suck the blood out of the wound at once. That was a poisonous snake that bit me, I'm sure, from the way it darted off into the rushes. Any proper snake, a grass snake, say, would've crawled away slow and dignified like, but this dratted creature wriggled off like a flash o' lightnin'. Dead scared of me it was! But the question now is who was more scared—me or it?

There was no time to consider this difficult problem for time was pressing, and without more ado Shchukar bent himself double, but try as he might, he could not reach the bite with his lips. Then taking a firm hold

of his heel and instep he wrenched his foot towards him so hard that something clicked sharply in his ankle. The excruciating pain flung the old man flat on his back. For about five minutes he lay without stirring. When he came to himself, Shchukar worked the toes of his foot and reasoned with himself in utter consternation. It started with a snake bite, and this is the next thing. Well, this is the first time I've ever known a man sprain his own ankle of his own free will. Tell anyone you like about such a thing and they'd never believe it. "Shchukar spinning his yarns again!" that's what they'd say. Well, some omens, eh! What next, I wonder. . . . The plague take him, that Davidov! I told him as kind as I could. And what am I to do now? How shall I get those horses harnessed?

However, there was no more time to waste. Shchukar pulled himself up and gingerly tried to put his left foot to the ground. To his great joy the pain turned out to be not so agonising after all and, though not without difficulty, he found himself able to move. Crumbling a small lump of clay on his palm, he moistened it with spittle and carefully rubbed it on the bite, and only when, hobbling and trying not to put his weight on his injured foot, he walked over to the horses did he notice on the other side of the stream, about four metres away from him, something that made his eyes blaze and his lips tremble in irrestrainable fury. On the opposite bank, rolled up in a ball, a small grass snake was dozing sweetly on a hummock. That it was a grass snake there could be no doubt whatsoever.

Shchukar simply exploded in rage. Never before had his speech been on such a lofty plane of inspired protest. Setting forward his sprained foot and solemnly extending his arm, he pronounced in quivering tones: "You cursed reptile! Cold-blooded swine! Plague in yellow goggles! How could you, you vile insect, frighten

me, a producer, to death like that! And I was stupid enough to think that you were not you but a proper snake! And just what are you, if we go into the question? A crawlin' worm, and nothin' more! The only thing to do is to stamp on you again and crush you to dust and ashes. And if I hadn't sprained my ankle because of you, you viper, that's just what I'd do to you, so get that into your head!"

Shchukar paused for breath and swallowed hard. The grass snake had lifted its chiselled marble-black head and seemed to be listening attentively to the sound of human speech addressed to it for the first time. When he had rested a little, Shchukar went on: "Goggle at me, with your shameless eyes, you unclean spirit, would you?! You think you'll get away with it? Oh no, my lad, now you're going to get everything you're entitled to for your present day's work! Think yourself an adaptor, eh! By the time I've dealt with you, you'll be nothing but an apathy, and that's a fact!"

Grandad Shchukar lowered his wrathful gaze and among the small pebbles washed down from the top of Red Ravine noticed a large rounded stone. Forgetting about his injured foot, he stepped boldly forward. A sharp pain shot through his ankle and he rolled over on his side, uttering unmentionable curses but still grasping the stone.

By the time he had pulled himself, grunting and groaning, to his feet, the snake had disappeared. It seemed to have been spirited away. Shchukar dropped his weapon and spread his arms in a gesture of utter bewilderment.

"Did you ever see such a thing? This is black magic, this is! Where's he got to, the fiend? Must have slipped into the water again. Yes, once your luck's out it's out. I reckon I haven't seen the end of this yet. I shouldn't have started a conversation with him, old fool that I

am, I ought just to have picked up that stone quietly and given him one straight on the head with my first shot. It'd be no good otherwise because I might have missed him with my second, and that's a fact! But how am I to hit him now if he's hopped it? That's the question!"

Grandad Shchukar stood for a while by the stream, scratching the back of his head, then with a gesture of despair limped off to harness up the horses. Until he had put a respectable distance between himself and the stream, he still glanced round—just a few times, to make sure.

With the wind blowing over it the steppe breathed powerfully and steadily, to the full extent of its mighty chest, the heady and always slightly melancholy scent of mown grass; from the oak groves along the edge of the road drifted a freshness mingled with the dead but invigorating smell of rotted oak leaves; yet last year's ash leaves for some reason smelled of youth, of spring, and perhaps even a little of violets. This mingling of different scents for some reason always makes the ordinary man feel rather sad and a little uneasy, particularly when he is quite alone in the steppe. But not so Grandad Shchukar. With his injured left foot propped comfortably on his rolled up coat, and his right dangling over the side of the break, he smiled with toothless gums, screwed up his time-faded eyes contentedly, and his peeling nose twitched as it greedily inhaled the familiar scents of the steppe.

And why shouldn't he be pleased with life? The pain in his leg had eased a little, a cloud blown up from somewhere far away in the east had covered the sun and would do so for a long time, and a deep purple shadow had spread over the plain, the low hills, the mounds and the ravines; it had become easier to breathe, and ahead there awaited him a sumptuous sup-

per. No, say what you like, but for the time being Grandad Shchukar was not having such a bad life!

On the crest of a hill, as soon as he spotted the team's wagon and camp in the distance, Shchukar halted his lazily trotting horses and got out of the break. There was still a dull, nagging pain in his ankle but he could stand more or less firmly, and the old man made up his mind. I'll show them it's not just a water-carrier coming but the collective farm's coachman. After all, I'm driver to Davidov, Makar and other important authorities, and I've got to drive fit to make people envious of me a mile away!

Swearing by all the devils and uttering plaintive groans, the old man curbed the horses, which had already sensed the nearness of camp and a night's rest, stood up at his full height on the break, planted his feet wide apart, drew the reins tight and uttered a wild whoop. The stallions moved off at a swinging trot. The downward slope gave a fillip to their pace and presently the wind was filling Shchukar's unbelted shirt like a sail. But he urged more and more speed from the horses and, grimacing with the pain in his leg, waved his whip gaily and shouted in a high-pitched voice: "Come on, my darlings, show us your mettle!"

The first man in the camp to see him was Agafon Dubtsov.

"Some devil or other is standing at the reins like a Tatar. Hi, Pryanishkov, can you see who's paying us a visit?"

From the top of an unfinished rick of hay Pryanishkov shouted merrily: "Here comes our propaganda team. It's Grandad Shchukar!"

"Well, that's a good thing," said Dubtsov, smiling with satisfaction. "We've been getting bored stiff lately. The old chap's going to have supper with us, and we'll make him stay for the night."

So saying, he pulled his knapsack out from under the wagon, rummaged busily in it, then pushed into his pocket a small bottle of vodka that had already been started.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When he had emptied his second bowl of the thin wheatmeal gruel with a few lumps of fat in it, Grandad Shchukar attained a state of complete contentment and slight drowsiness. He looked up gratefully at the generous cook and said: "Thank you kindly, everyone, for a good supper and the vodka, and my greatest respects to you, Darya Kupriyanovna. If you want to know, you're not a woman, you're a great big chest full of gold, and that's a fact. With your skill at making gruel, you shouldn't be cookin' for us, farmer fellows, but for Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin himself. I'll bet you'd have a medal on your chest for extra special work before a year was out, or mebbe he'd put a stripe or something on your sleeve. Believe me, he would, and that's a fact. If anyone knows what the main thing in life is, it's me."

"Well, what is it?" Dubtsov, who was sitting beside him, asked quickly. "What is the main thing, granfer, to your way of thinking?"

"Grub! I'm tellin' you that for a fact—grub, my boys, there's nothin' more important than grub!"

"You're making a mistake, granfer," Dubtsov said sadly, squinting with his Gypsy eyes at the rest of his listeners and keeping a very straight face. "You're making a grave mistake, and it's all because your little brain has got as thin as this here gruel that you've been eating in your old age. Your brains have got watery, that's why you make mistakes."

Grandad Shchukar smiled condescendingly.

"It remains to be seen who's got more water on the brain—you or me. And what do you think is the main thing in life?"

"Love," Dubtsov breathed the word rather than spoke it, and rolled his eyes so dreamily that the first person to give way, as she looked at his brown, pock-marked face, was Darya Kupriyanovna.

She snorted like a horse scenting rain and, shaking with laughter, covered her purple face with the sleeve of her blouse.

"Love?! Bah!" Shchukar sneered contemptuously. "What's the good of your love without decent grub? Bunkum! If you wasn't fed for a week, even your own wife would give you the go-by, not to mention Darya Kupriyanovna."

"That depends," Dubtsov persisted.

"No depending about it. I know all about this," Grandad Shchukar cut in, and lifted his forefinger meaningfully. "I'll tell you a little story and you'll see everythin' clear as daylight, and there won't be no need for any more argument."

Grandad Shchukar had rarely encountered a more attentive audience. About thirty people were sitting round the fire and they were all afraid to miss a single word of his tale. So, at least, it seemed to him. After all, what could you expect from the old man? He never had the chance to speak at meetings; Davidov was usually silent on a drive and occupied with thoughts of his own; and Shchukar's old woman had never been talkative even in her youth. Who was the poor old man to empty his heart to? And so now, having found a well-disposed audience and feeling in an excellent mood after his supper, he decided to get everything off his chest. He settled himself comfortably with his legs crossed, smoothed his little beard with his hand, and had just opened his mouth to begin a leisurely tale

when he was interrupted by Dubtsov, who said with mock severity: "Mind you tell us the truth, granfer. None of your yarns! You know what we do with liars—we tan 'em with a pair of reins!"

Grandad Shchukar gave a deep sigh and stroked his left ankle with his palm.

"Don't you try to scare me, Agafon. I've already been scared to death once today, as it is. . . . Well, this is what happened. Last spring Davidov calls me in and says: 'Take a couple of sacks of oats from the store, granfer, draw some grub for yourself and buzz off to Dry Gully right away on the stallions. Our mares are grazin' out there and I want you to show up with a pair of good suitors for 'em. Deaf Vasili Babkin's in charge of the herd. You'll split that herd up into two droves, and Vasili will take one and you, the other. But you'll be responsible for the producers and you'll feed 'em up on oats.' And to tell you the honest truth, I didn't rightly know what a producer was, never heard the word before. There's a facer, I thought, I know what a stallion is, I know what a mare is, and I know what a geldin' is, too. So I asks: 'What's a producer?' And here's his answer. 'Anyone,' he says, 'that produces offspring is a producer.' And then I asks: 'Can you call a bull a producer then?' He frowned a bit and says: 'Of course, you can.' So then I asks: 'Are we producers ourselves?' And he bursts out laughin' and says: 'Everyone answers for himself over that, granfer.' Anyway it seems that whether you're a sparrow, an animal or a man, as long as you're of the male sex, you're a real honest-to-goodness thoroughbred producer. Well, that's very nice, I thinks to myself. And then another question: 'What about the people as produces the grain, what are they? Producers or what?' I asks him. And he just sighs and says: 'You're behind the times, granfer.' And this is what I says to that: 'You're the one that's

behind the times, Semyon, old chap, because I was born forty years before you and you're still behind me.' And that's how we settled the question."

"So you're a producer, too, are you, grandpa?" Darya Kupriyanovna asked breathlessly.

"What do you think I am then?" Shchukar answered with pride.

"Oh, Lor'!" Darya groaned and was unable to say anything more, for she had buried her face in her apron and only a muffled snorting could be heard in the silence.

"Don't you take any notice of her, granfer, just stick to your story," Kondrat Maidannikov said gently and turned away from the fire.

"I've never paid any attention to these women all my life. If I had, mebbe I shouldn't have lived all this long time," Shchukar replied confidently.

And he resumed his tale.

"Well, I got to the herd and had a look round, and what a sight it was! Such an animation all round that I could have stayed there for ever! The steppe all blue with flowers, the young grass, the mares a grazin', and the warm sun a shinin'—in a word, all the animation you could want!"

"What's that word you said?" Beskhlebnov enquired.

"Animation? That's when everythin' around's full of life. Animate means living, being happy, that's what it means. It's when you've got nothing to worry about and can go and enjoy yourself. It's a learned word," Shchukar replied with unhesitating assurance.

"And where did you get all these words from?" the inquisitive Beskhlebnov insisted.

"From Makar Nagulnov. We're great pals, we are. And he's a learnin' this here English language, and I'm in on it too. He's given me a great big book, fat as Darya Kupriyanovna, a dictionary it's called. Not an

A.B.C., like children learn from, but a dictionary, for folk who're getting on in years. He gives it to me and says: 'Study this, granfer, it'll come in handy in your old age.' And so I'm doing a bit of studyin'. But don't interrupt me, Akim, old chap, or I may forget what I was sayin'. I'll tell you about that book of words later on. Well, as I was tellin' you, I arrived at my destination with my producers, but the trouble was I didn't have any luck with my producers or with the animation. And I'm tellin' you, good folk, that anyone who don't know that deaf Vasili very well is going to live a good ten years longer than anyone who does.

"He's such a log of wood, he is, that compared with him Demid the Silent is the most talkative fellow in the whole village. You can't imagine the amount of torture I went through in the steppe because of him being so silent. I couldn't spend my time talkin' to the mares, could I? And that Vasili, he'd keep quiet for days on end. The only noise he made was when he chewed, and the rest of the time he'd either be sleepin' without a sound or else lyin' awake under his blanket like a rotten tree-trunk and keeping quiet just the same. Now and again he'd blink his eyes a bit, but never a murmur came out of him. So there was the bloomin' insoluble problem he gave me. In short, I lived there for three days and three nights as if I was havin' a party with the corpses in a graveyard, and I began talkin' to myself. Oho, I thought, this won't do! If this goes on much longer, a sociable fellow like myself may go out of his mind.

"You know how I hate it when my dear old pal Makar Nagulnov gets up on the annual holidays, that is on May Day and the Seventh of November, and starts burlin' his long speeches about the world revolution, and spittin' out all kinds of queer words I can't understand, but just then I'd willingly have listened to him for

twenty-four hours at a stretch, as if it was the song of the nightingale or the cocks' crowin' at midnight. And what d'you know, citizens, about this cocks' crowin'? Why, it's as good as bein' in church when they're singin' a requiem or some other touchin' bit o' stuff...."

"Tell us about your love without grub, not about the way the cocks crow," the team's time-keeper interrupted Shchukar impatiently.

"Now, don't get impatient, citizens, I'll be coming round to the various kinds of love, that's not the question. As I was sayin', about this deaf Vasili. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd stuck to just keepin' mum, but he turned out to be such a heavy eater on top of it all, I couldn't do anything with him. We'd make some porridge or dumplings out of a bit of soggy pastry, and what would happen? I'd lift one spoonful out of that pot to his five! He'd pitch in with his enormous big spoon like the piston of a steam engine. Out in, in out, it'd go, and by the time I had a look there'd been only a few scrapings left on the bottom. I'd get up hungry and he'd lie down with his belly bulgin' like a-bubble and start hiccoughin' fit to wake the whole neighbourhood. He'd hiccough for about two hours, then he'd start snorin', the unclean spirit. And the way he snored, the villain, he'd make even the mares that were grazin' round our tent get scared and bolt for it. But he'd just go on sleepin' all day as sound as a marmot in winter.

"Yes, that was the terrible life I led out there. Hungry as a stray dog and not a soul even to pass the time of day with. The second day I sat down beside Vasili, made my hands into a trumpet and yelled into his ear: 'What made you deaf, was it the war or did you catch scrofula when you was a baby?' And he bawled back at me even louder: 'During the war! In 1919, the Reds landed a shell near me from a four-inch gun on one of their armoured trains. It killed the horse under me and

I've had shell-shock and been stone deaf ever since.' And after that I asks him: 'What is it, Vasili, makes you guzzle your grub like you'd gone out of your mind? Is that from shell-shock too?' And he answers me: 'Yes, there's some clouds comin' up. That's a good thing. We need rain real bad!' Just try and talk to such a jug-gins!"

"When are you going to tell us about love?" Dubtsov asked impatiently.

Shchukar frowned in annoyance. "You've got this love business on the brain, damn it! But I've been tryin' to keep away from it all my life, and if it hadn't been for my old father forcin' me, rest his soul, I'd never even have got married. and now you want me to go talkin' about love of all things. A fine question to discuss. . . . But if you must know, this is what happened because of love without grub.

"I got to my destination and split up the herd into two droves, but my pair of bridegrooms wouldn't so much as look at the mares. They just went on nibblin' away at the grass without even stoppin' for a rest. Not a scrap of interest in their brides! This is a fine thing, I thinks to myself! Now I'm going to look proper silly with these here producers of mine. Here am I feeding 'em on oats and they won't take so much as a peep at the mares.

"Well, they didn't on the first day, and they didn't on the second. And it made me feel awkward in front of them mares, I had to turn my face away when I went near them because I couldn't look them in the eye, just couldn't! I'd never blushed in my life before, but now I started learnin' how. As soon as I got near them to drive them down to the pond for water, I'd start blushin' like a girl!

"Lord above, the amount of shame they brought on me, them producers of mine, in them three days! I was

up against a blank wall. And on the third day, what do you think I saw? A young mare starts flirting with my producer—Flower, I calls him—the bay one, with the blaze on his forehead and a white stocking on his left hind leg. And there she was twistin' and turnin' all round him, and nuzzlin' him and bitin' him gentle like and showin' him any amount of love, and all he did was put his head on her back, shut his eyes and whimper pitifully. . . . A fine flower he was! Never been a worse one, I reckon! And I was a shakin' with anger. What do those mares and fillies think of me, I was wonderin'. The old devil, I expect they were sayin', what does he mean by it, bringing us a couple of down-and-outs like these. And mebbe they said something even worse.

"And that poor little filly, she lost all patience, she did. She just turns her back on my Flower and gives him one in the ribs with her hind legs that makes something go pop in his inside. And then I runs up to him welpin' bitter tears and starts layin' about him with my whip. 'If you calls yourself a producer,' I`shouts, 'you've got to be one and not bring yourself and me to shame in my old age!'

"And he, my poor sufferer, ran away about twenty yards, then stopped and gave such a pitiful whinny that it went straight to my heart. And then I burst into tears out of pity for him. So I went up to him without my whip and stroked his muzzle, and he just put his head on my shoulder and sighed.

"Then I took him by the mane and led him back to the tent and says to him: 'Let's go home, my little Flower, there's no point in us hangin' around here bringin' shame on our heads for nothing.' And so I just harnessed 'em up and started off back to the village. And that deaf Vasili bellowed after me: 'Come out here next year, granfer. we'll live in the steppe and share our

porridge. And by that time your stallions will have got their strength back, if they don't peg out altogether.'

"Well, I got back to the village and reported everything to Davidov, and he clutched his head and shouted at me: 'You didn't look after them properly!' But I gave him one of his own back for that: 'It's not me who's bad at lookin' after 'em, it's you that's mighty good at riding 'em to death. Either it's you, Your Honour, or Makar, or Andrei Razmyotnov. Those stallions never come out of the shafts, and you can't get a handful of oats out of Ostrovnov if you go down to him on your bended knees for it. Who puts stallions in the shafts anyway? If they're producers, they ought to get plenty of fodder and be kept off work, or you'll be in a proper fix!' It was a good thing they sent us a pair of producers from the stanitsa, as you remember, and solved the problem of the mares that way. Well, that's what happens to love without the right kind of grub. Can you see that, you foolish folk? And there's nothing to laugh at, this is a serious subject we're discussing."

Grandad Shchukar paused to survey his listeners with an air of triumph and went on: "What do you know about life if you spend all your time scratchin' at the earth, like beetles in a dung-heap? At least, I goes to the stanitsa once a week and sometimes more. Take you, Darya Kupriyanovna, have you ever heard them talkin' on the wireless?"

"How could I, when it's ten years since I've been to the stanitsa."

"That's what I'm saying! But I hear all I want of it every time I go there. And a darn rotten thing it is, too, I must say!" Shchukar shook his head and chuckled quietly. "There's a black thing hangin' on a post just opposite the district committee building and, Lord above, the way it bellows! Makes your hair stand on end and you get cold shivers down your back even on a hot day!

I just unharness my two flowers under that thing, and to start with I have a nice time listenin' to all kinds of talk about the collective farms, the working class and so on, but after that the best thing is to stick your head in a bag of oats, because there's someone with a voice like a stallion starts a crowin' from Moscow: 'Fill the glass again and let us drink once more. . . .' And you wouldn't believe it, kind folk, but it makes me want a drink so bad I can't do anything with myself. Whenever I'm sent off to the stanitsa, sinner that I am, I pinch a dozen eggs or as many as I can from my old woman and, when I get there, off I go to the market. And when I've sold 'em I go and have a few tots of vodka while I listen to the songs comin' out of that thing, and then I can wait for my Comrade Davidov all day if need be. But if I can't find any eggs at home, because my old woman has learned to keep an eye on me before I leave, I goes into the district committee office and asks my Comrade Davidov very quiet like: 'Semyon, my darling boy, won't you stand me a drink, I'm gettin' so fed up waitin' for you with nothing to do.' And he's a kind chap, he never refuses me and so off I go for a drink, and when I've had a little one, I either has a nice nap in the sunshine or I asks someone to mind my producers for me and go off to settle some of my insoluble problems in the stanitsa."

"What kind of problems might you have in the stanitsa?" Akim Beskhlebnov asked.

Grandad Shchukar gave a sigh. "There's always plenty of things to worry about when you've got a household to run. Either you've got to buy a bottle of paraffin or a few boxes of matches. And you was askin' about them learned words, about that dictionary. Well, in that dictionary the words are printed like this. There's one learned word in great big letters, I can see 'em without spectacles, but after it comes the explana-

tion in tiny little letters. Of course, I understand many words without any explanation. For example, what's the meaning of 'monopoly'? It means a pub, of course. 'Adaptor' means a fellow without any backbone, a real rotter. 'Aquarelle' means a pretty girl, as I figure it, but 'border' means just the opposite, nothing more than a woman that's making a whore of herself, that's what that means. And to do a 'mezzanine' is the same as making this here love that you're so crazy about, Agafon, and so on and so forth. But anyway I needed spectacles. We got to the stanitsa, Davidov and me, and I thought I'd go and buy a pair. The old woman had given me the money for 'em as it was such an important thing.

"Well, I called in at a hospital, and it turned out that it wasn't a hospital at all, but a maternity home. In one room there was the women a groanin' and a wailin', and the other was full of babies miaowing like little kittens. Well, I thought, I won't get any specs here, I've landed in the wrong place. So I went to another hospital, and there I found two chaps sitting in the porch trying to beat each other at draughts. Well, I says good-day to them and asks: 'Where can I buy a pair of spectacles here?' And they started neighin' at the top of their voices: 'They'll give you a pair of specs here, granfer, that'll make your eyes pop out,' they says. 'This is a hospital for venereal diseases and you'd better get out of here as quick as you can, or else they'll start treating you by force.'

"Of course, I was scared to death and went rushin' out of that hospital as fast as my legs would carry me. But they, the silly fools, came out of the gate after me, and one started whistlin' for all he was worth, while the other bawled down the street: 'Run faster, you old sinner, or they'll catch you!' And that made me gallop like a racehorse. You never know what tricks the devil

will get up to while God's asleep—they might have caught me by accident, and then just you try makin' excuses to them doctors!

"Well, I ran all the way to the chemist's and my heart nearly gave up. But there weren't no spectacles at the chemist's either. You'll have to go to Millerovo, granfer, they tell me, or Rostov, you can only get spectacles with a prescription from an eye doctor. No, I thought, you won't catch me goin' there. So, you see, I have to do a lot of guessin' when I read this dictionary, the problem of my gettin' a pair of specs has also turned out to be insoluble.... Yes, all kinds of adventures happen to me in the stanitsa, there's no counting 'em."

"You'd better tell us everything in the right order, granfer. You keep hopping from one branch to another like a sparrow, and we can't tell the end from the beginning," Dubtsov urged him.

"I'm tellin' it you in the right order, but don't keep interruptin' me. If you interrupt me again, I'll lose the thread and then I'll get into such a mess there won't be one in the whole bunch of you that'll be able to follow my story. Well, I was walkin' through the stanitsa one day, and I saw comin' towards me a young girl. Lovely as a baby goat she was, all dressed up in town clothes and carryin' a little bag in her hand. She was wearin' them high heels, tappin' along in them she was, like a goat with its hoofs. And in my old age I've got so keen on everything new, it's something terrible! Why, lads, I even tried ridin' a bicycle. I saw a youngster ridin' one and I says to him: 'Hey, sonnie, let me have a go on that machine of yours.' He didn't mind a bit. He helped me to get perched on his two-wheeler and held me while I pedalled away as hard as I could. Then I says to him: 'Don't hold me any more, for God's sake, I want to try and ride myself.' But as soon as he let

go of me, the handle-bars twisted out my hands and I dived straight into an acacia bush. You could never count the number of thorns I got in different parts of me from that acacia. It took me a week to pick 'em all out, and I tore my trousers as well on a tree stump."

"Never mind the trousers, granfer, tell us about the girl," Dubtsov interrupted him sternly. "Why the hell should we want to know about your trousers?"

"Again you're interruptin' me," Grandad Shchukar said with a sigh. Nevertheless he decided to go on: "Well, as I was saying, this lovely little goat was walkin' along swinging her arm like a soldier, and I, old sinner that I am, thought to myself, how might I manage to go just a few paces with her arm-in-arm? I'd never walked arm-in-arm with anyone in my life, but in the stanitsa I'd often seen the young folk goin' along like that. It's either he takes her arm, or she takes his. And now I'm askin' you, citizens, where could I ever have had that pleasure? It's not the custom to walk like that in the village, people would laugh at you. So where else could I?"

"And now I was faced with the problem of how to take a walk with this lovely girl. And I hit upon an idea. I bent up double and started groaning so that I could be heard all down the street. And she comes runnin' up and asks: 'What's the matter, grandad?' And so I says to her: 'I've fallen ill, my dear, I can't walk to the hospital, my back's breakin'...' 'I'll take you there,' she says, 'just lean on me.' And so I takes her boldly by the arm and off we go on our journey. Very nice it was, too. As soon as we got as far as the shop I straightened up a bit, and before she had time to think, I gave her a big kiss on the cheek and slipped away into the shop, though I didn't want to buy anything. And she gave me such a look and shouted after me: 'You're an old faker and a hooligan, grandad!' So I stopped and

said: 'Necessity can make you do worse things than that, my dear. I've never walked arm-in-arm with a beautiful girl in my life, you know, and it'll soon be time for me to peg out.' Then I dodged into the shop because I thought she might call a militiaman. But she just laughed and walked off with her high heels tapping. And I ran into that shop so fast I could hardly get my breath. And the salesman says to me: 'Is there a fire somewhere, grandad?' And there I am, right out of breath, but still I says to him: 'Worse than that. Give me a box of matches!' "

Grandad Shchukar would have gone on much longer with his endless tale, but his listeners, tired out by the day's work, began to drift away. In vain the old man begged them to listen to a few more stories, and soon there was not a single person left beside the dying embers of the fire.

Thoroughly disappointed and hurt, Grandad Shchukar wandered off to the mangers, climbed into one and, feeling shivery, lay down under his old coat. At midnight there was a heavy dew. Shchukar woke up shaking with cold. I'll go and ask the Cossacks to let me into their wagon. Otherwise I'll be frozen to death out here like a stray puppy, he decided.

Slowly but inevitably the skein of Shchukar's misadventures continued to unwind. . . . Remembering from the days of the spring sowing that the Cossacks had slept in the wagon and the women outside, and not realising in his sleepy state that in the past two months something might have changed, Shchukar crept quietly into the wagon on all fours, pulled off his shoes, and lay down by the wall. He fell asleep immediately in the warmth, but awoke shortly afterwards feeling that he was being suffocated. Realising that somebody's bare leg was resting on his chest, he thought with great annoyance: The way these wretched fellows sleep!

Kicking their legs about as if they was jumpin' into a saddle.

But what was his horror when in trying to discard this living burden he suddenly discovered that it was not a man's leg at all but Darya Kupriyanovna's bare arm, and felt her powerful breathing on his cheek. The women were sleeping in the wagon that night.

The horrified Shchukar lay for several minutes without moving, then breaking into a muck sweat he grabbed his shoes, crept like a guilty cat out of the wagon and limped hastily in the direction of the break. Never before had he harnessed up his stallions with such dexterity! Wielding his whip mercilessly, he set off at a swinging trot, glancing now and then over his shoulder at the wagon that loomed ominously against the background of the lightening sky.

It's a good job I woke up in time. What if I'd overslept and the women had seen me next to Darya Kupriyanovna and her embracin' me with that bloomin' great arm of hers? Blessed Virgin, protect and have mercy on us! They'd have laughed at me till doomsday, and long after it, too!

The swift summer dawn advanced. The wagon dropped out of sight. But on the other side of the hill a fresh shock lay in store for Shchukar. Glancing down at his feet, he noticed that on one foot he was wearing an almost brand new woman's shoe, with a coquettish leather bow and stylish seams. Judging by the size, it could belong only to Darya Kupriyanovna.

Shuddering with horror, Shchukar prayed to the Almighty: "Merciful Lord, why do you punish me like this? In the dark I must have got the shoes mixed up. Now how shall I show myself to my old woman? My own shoe on one foot, and a woman's on the other—there's an insoluble problem for you!"

The problem turned out to be soluble, however. Shchukar swung his horses round towards the village, for he had reached the wise decision that it was impossible for him to turn up at the stanitsa either barefooted or wearing odd shoes. To hell with this surveyor, they can do without him. There's Soviet power everywhere and collective farms everywhere, what difference does it make if one collective farm pinches a bit of mowing land from another? he reasoned gloomily as he drove back to Gremyachy Log.

About two kilometres from the village, where a steep bank ran close along the road, he reached another and no less bold decision. He took off the shoes, glanced about him furtively, then threw them down the bank, whispering to himself as he did so: "I'm not goin' to get killed because of you, curse you!"

Cheered and comforted by the knowledge of having rid himself so splendidly of all the evidence against him, Shchukar even permitted himself to grin at the thought of how surprised Darya Kupriyanovna would be when she discovered the mysterious disappearance of her shoe.

But it was too early for rejoicing. At home there awaited him the two final most terrible and crushing blows. . . .

As he drove up to his yard he noticed a crowd of excited women. The old woman hasn't pegged out, has she? Shchukar thought in alarm. But when he pushed his way in silence through the grinning crowd and, on entering the kitchen, glanced hurriedly around, his legs sagged under him and, making the sign of the cross, he forced himself to whisper: "What's this?"

His red-eyed wife was nursing a child wrapped in rags and the child was emitting long shuddering wails.

"What's a goin' on here?" Shchukar whispered a little louder.

Her eyes glittering furiously between swollen lids, the old woman shouted: "They've planted your child on us, that's what! You learned lecher! Read that paper on the table!"

The world was going dark before Shchukar's eyes, but he managed to read the letters scrawled on the sheet of wrapping paper.

"As you're the father of this child, granfer, you can feed it and look after it."

.
By evening, Shchukar, quite hoarse with shouting and excitement, had almost succeeded in convincing his wife that he had nothing whatsoever to do with the birth of the child, but at that very moment an eight-year-old lad, Lyubishkin's son, appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Grandad," he said, "I was minding the sheep this morning and I saw you drop your shoes down the bank. I've found them and brought them to you. Here they are." And he held out the ill-starred pair of odd shoes.

What happened afterwards is "wrapped in mystery", as Lokteyev the cobbler, a bosom friend of Shchukar's, once used to say. All we do know is that for a week Grandad Shchukar went about with his cheek bandaged and his eye swollen, and when he was asked by some who could not forbear a smile why his cheek was bandaged, he would turn away and reply that the only tooth he had left in his mouth was aching and aching so badly that he could not even talk.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Andrei Razmyotnov arrived at the village Soviet early in the morning to sign and dispatch his report on the haymaking and the preparations for the grain har-

vest. But he had scarcely had time to look through the reports from the various teams when there was a sharp knock at the door.

"Come in!" Razmyotnov shouted without looking up from his papers.

When the two strangers entered the room it suddenly seemed crowded. One of them in a new mackintosh, short and stocky, with a round, clean-shaven and quite unremarkable face, stepped smilingly towards the table and offered Razmyotnov a hand that was as firm as a rock.

"Boiko, Polikarp Petrovich, purveyor to the Shakhty Miners' Supply Department. This is my assistant, his name's Khizhnyak." And he made a casual gesture with his thumb at his companion standing by the door.

In outward appearance the man by the door offered an obvious resemblance to a herdsman or a cattle dealer. His stained tarpaulin coat and hood, his broad-topped cowhide boots, crumpled grey cap and smart whip with two leather tassles in his hand, all bore silent witness to his trade. But Khizhnyak's face was strangely out of keeping with his outward appearance. The sharp intelligent eyes, the ironic creases at the corners of his thin lips, the habit of raising his left eyebrow as though he were listening intently to something, and a certain generally intellectual demeanour suggested at once to the observant eye that this man was far removed from the purveying of cattle and the needs of agriculture. And Razmyotnov was quick to notice this. He cast only a cursory glance at Khizhnyak's face, however, and at once fixed his eyes on the man's excessively broad shoulders, smiling in spite of himself. Fine purveyors, he thought. They look like a couple of highwaymen, the pair of them. They shouldn't be buying up cattle but lying in wait under a bridge at night to bash Soviet merchants over the head with a club. Maintaining a

serious expression with some difficulty, he asked: "What can I do for you?"

"We're buying up privately-owned cattle from the collective farmers. We take cattle, sheep, and also pigs. For the time being we're not interested in fowls. We pay co-operative prices and a bit extra for well-fattened animals. You know yourself, comrade chairman, that miners' work is heavy work and we've got to give our miners their full ration."

"Your credentials." Razmyotnov tapped the table gently with his open palm.

Both purveyors placed their warrants on the table. Everything was in order, properly signed and stamped, but Razmyotnov spent a long time meticulously examining the documents and failed to notice the wink Boiko gave his assistant or the smile that appeared momentarily on their faces.

"Do you think they're forged?" Boiko asked, now smiling openly, and without waiting for an invitation sat down on a chair by the window.

"No, I don't think your papers are forged... But I wonder what brought you specially to our collective farm?" Razmyotnov had not accepted the other's jocular tone and was keeping the conversation on a serious level.

"Why specially to you? Yours is not the only farm we shall visit. We have already been to six neighbouring farms and bought up about fifty head of cattle, including three pairs of old, worn-out bulls, a few calves, some barren cows, a few sheep and about thirty pigs..."

"Thirty-seven," the broad-shouldered purveyor standing by the door corrected his chief.

"Quite right, we have bought thirty-seven pigs, and paid a decent price for them. And we shall be going on to other villages from here."

"Do you pay on the spot?" Razmyotnov enquired.

"Absolutely! Of course, we don't carry much money about with us. These are troubled times, you know, comrade chairman, you never know what might happen.... But we have a good supply of money orders."

Razmyotnov leaned back in his chair and burst out laughing.

"Do you mean to say you're afraid of being robbed? Why, the pair of you could empty anyone's pockets and strip him naked!"

Boiko smiled restrainedly. Two womanish dimples appeared in his round pink cheeks. Khizhnyak preserved an air of complete indifference and stared absently out of the window. Only now that he had turned his face to the window did Razmyotnov notice a long, deep scar running across his left cheek from his chin to the lobe of his ear.

"Is that a keepsake from the war on your cheek?" Razmyotnov asked.

Khizhnyak turned quickly towards him with a brief smile. "Nothing to do with the war. I got it later...."

"I thought it didn't look like a sabre cut. Did your wife scratch you?"

"No, my woman's one of the quiet kind. I got it drinking, a pal of mine slashed me with a knife."

"You're a good-looking fellow, I thought it was your wife scratched you, or maybe it was something to do with another woman, some love affair maybe?" Razmyotnov continued his artless questions, chuckling to himself and stroking his moustache.

"You seem to be a very smart fellow, chairman," Khizhnyak said, smiling condescendingly.

"I have to be in my job.... That scar of yours was not made by a knife but by a cavalry sword, I know all about such things. And as far as I can see, you're as much a purveyor as I am a bishop. And your face isn't

right either, it's not an ordinary man's face; nor are your hands. I reckon they've never gripped a bull's horns in their life, nobleman's hands they are. . . . They may be big, but they're white. Why didn't you get them a bit sunburnt or smear 'em with dung, then I'd believe that you're a purveyor. And as for that whip you carry about with you, that don't mean a thing, you can't fool me with a whip."

"You're a smart fellow, chairman!" Khizhnyak repeated, and he was no longer smiling. "But you're only smart in one direction. The scar on my face is from a sabre cut, I just didn't want to admit it. I served with the Whites at one time, and that's where I picked it up. But who wants to remember a thing like that? And as for my hands, I'm not a drover, I'm a purveyor. My job is to count up the cash, not twist the calves' tails. You're worried about my appearance, Comrade Razmyotnov? But I haven't been a purveyor very long. Before that I used to be an agronomist, but I got the sack for drinking, and so I had to change my trade. . . . Now do you understand, comrade chairman? You've forced me to be frank and now you've had a complete confession out of me."

"I don't need your confession any more than a dog needs a fifth leg. Let the GPU confess you and give you the sacrament, that's no concern of mine," Razmyotnov retorted. Without turning his head, he shouted: "Marya! Come here!"

The girl messenger on duty at the village Soviet entered timidly from the adjoining room.

"Run and fetch Nagulnov. Tell him I want him here at once, it's urgent," Razmyotnov ordered and glanced keenly first at Khizhnyak then at Boiko.

Khizhnyak shrugged his huge shoulders in bewildered annoyance, sat down on a bench and turned away, but Boiko, who was shaking like a jelly with restrained

laughter, finally burst out in a high tenor voice: "That's vigilance for you! That's what I like to see! Caught, eh, Comrade Khizhnyak? Caught like a chicken in the broth!"

He slapped his fleshy knees, doubled up and laughed with such genuine spontaneity that Razmyotnov eyed him in amazement.

"What are you laughing at, fatty? If you don't look out you may find yourselves crying at the stanitsa, both of you! Whether you like it or not, I'm going to send the pair of you to the district centre for investigation of your identity. You seem a bit suspicious to me, comrade purveyors."

Wiping the tears out of his eyes and still twisting his fleshy lips in an effort not to laugh, Boiko asked: "What about our papers? You checked them and said they were in order, didn't you?"

"Your papers can be in order but I don't like your looks," Razmyotnov replied grimly and began to roll himself a cigarette.

Presently Makar Nagulnov arrived. Indicating the purveyors with a nod, he asked Razmyotnov: "Who are they?"

"Ask them yourself."

Nagulnov spoke to the purveyors, examined their papers and, turning again to Razmyotnov, asked: "What's the matter then? What did you call me for? These people have come to buy up cattle, let them get on with it."

Razmyotnov's eyes flashed, but he said with some restraint: "No, they won't do any buying up of cattle till I've checked their identity. I don't like the look of them—that's what's the matter! I'm going to send them straight off to the stanitsa and have them checked, then they can go on with their purveying."

Boiko said quietly: "Comrade Razmyotnov, tell your messenger to go outside. We have something to say."

"I've no secrets to discuss with you."

"Do what you're told," Boiko said just as quietly but in a tone of command.

And Razmyotnov obeyed. When they were quite alone in the building, Boiko pulled a small red card out of the inside pocket of his jacket and held it out to Razmyotnov with a smile.

"Read that, you sharp-eyed devil! As our little show didn't work, we must put our cards on the table. This is what it's all about, comrades. We are both members of the regional GPU administration and we have come here to find a certain individual, a dangerous political enemy, a conspirator against the state and a desperate counter-revolutionary. We decided to pose as purveyors, so as not to attract attention. It makes it easier for us to work. We go from house to house chatting to the people and we hope that sooner or later we shall get on the right trail."

"But why didn't you tell me who you were at once, Comrade Glukhov? Then there wouldn't have been any misunderstanding," Razmyotnov exclaimed.

"Security, my dear Razmyotnov! If we tell you, then tell Davidov, then Nagulnov, in a week the whole of Gremyachy Log will know who we are. For God's sake don't be offended, it's not that we don't trust you. But unfortunately such things do happen, and we can't afford to risk the failure of an operation that we consider very important," Boiko-Glukhov explained condescendingly, and having shown his little red card to Nagulnov put it away in his pocket.

"May we know who you are looking for?" Nagulnov asked.

Boiko-Glukhov rummaged silently in a large wallet and placed a photograph carefully on his fleshy palm. It was about the size of a passport photograph.

Razmyotnov and Nagulnov leaned forward over the table. An elderly man with an amiably smiling face, straight shoulders and a bull neck looked up at them from the small square of cardboard. But the simulated amiability of his smile was so out of tune with the wolf-shaped brow, the morose deep-set eyes and the square heavy jaw that Nagulnov gave a smirk and Razmyotnov said shaking his head: "Yes, not a very cheerful-looking chap that...."

"And that's the 'chap' we're looking for," Boiko-Glukhov said thoughtfully, wrapping the photograph carefully in a sheet of slightly soiled white paper and replacing it in his wallet. "His name is Polovtsev, first name and patronymic—Alexander Anisimovich. Former captain in the White army, punitive officer, took part in the execution of Podtyolkov and Krivoshlykov's detachment. A few years ago he was teaching under a false name, then he lived for a while in his own stanitsa. Now he's gone underground. He is one of the active organisers of an uprising that is being organised against Soviet power. According to information from our agents, he is in hiding somewhere in your district. And that's all we can say about this specimen. You can tell Davidov what we have told you, but no one else! I rely on you, comrades. Now, for the time being, goodbye. We shan't need to meet each other, unless there is some special reason, and if one of you happens to come across something that might interest us, summon me to the Soviet in the day-time, only in the day-time, to avoid rousing any suspicion among the people of the village. And the last thing is: be careful! It would be best for you not to go about at night at all. Polovtsev won't risk an act of violence, he doesn't want to give himself away, but there's no harm in being careful. On the whole, you'd better not go about at night, but if you have to, don't go alone. Always have a weapon

with you. However, it seems you do that already. While you were talking to Comrade Khizhnyak, didn't I hear you turning the drum of a revolver in your trousers pocket, Comrade Razmyotnov?"

Razmyotnov screwed up his eyes and turned away as though he had not heard the question. Nagulnov came to his rescue.

"Since they took a pot at me, we've kept ourselves ready for defence," he said.

Boiko-Glukhov gave a subtle smile. "Not only for defence, but for attack as well. Incidentally, Timofei Damaskov, nicknamed the Torn, who died at your hands, Comrade Nagulnov, was at one time connected with Polovtsev's organisation. There are also members of his organisation in your village," the omniscient "purveyor" added casually. "At a later date, however, he left it for reasons unknown to us. He fired at you not on Polovtsev's orders apparently, but for reasons of a personal nature."

Nagulnov nodded and Boiko-Glukhov went on in calm measured tones, as though he were giving a lecture.

"The fact that Timofei Damaskov did not hand over to Polovtsev's followers the heavy machine-gun that had been kept since the days of the Civil War in the Damaskovs' shed and was subsequently discovered by Davidov goes to show that for some reason or other Damaskov broke away from the Polovtsev group and became simply a lone bandit. But that's not the point. I will tell you a little about our task. We must catch Polovtsev alone and we must take him alive. That's essential for the time being. We shall disarm the rank-and-file members of his group later. I must add further that Polovtsev is merely a link in a long chain, but a rather important link. That is why the operation for his discovery and arrest has been entrusted to us and not to the members of the district GPU.

"To remove any feeling of offence that you may have against me, comrades, I will tell you that the only person who knows of our presence in your district is the head of your district GPU department. Even Nesterenko doesn't know. He's the secretary of the district Party committee, so why should he be bothered by a pair of cattle purveyors? Let him go on directing the Party work in his own district while we carry on with our business. I must say that in the collective farms we have visited up to now, we have passed ourselves off successfully for the people we said we were. You are the only man, Comrade Razmyotnov, who suspected Khizhnyak, and me, too, of not being real purveyors. It does credit to your powers of observation. But, in any case, I should have had to tell you in a couple of days' time who we really are. This is why. My professional sense tells me that Polovtsev is lurking somewhere in your village. We shall try to trace his former army comrades in the war against Germany and the Civil War. We know what units Polovtsev served in and the most likely thing is that he has made contact with some old comrade-in-arms. Briefly, that is all. Before we leave, we shall see each other again. For the time being—good-bye!"

At the doorstep Boiko-Glukhov glanced at Nagulnov.

"Would you like to know what has happened to your wife?"

Purple blotches appeared on Makar's cheeks and his eyes darkened. He cleared his throat and asked quietly: "Do you know where she is?"

"I do."

"Well?"

"In the town of Shakhty."

"What's she doing there? She's got no relatives or friends there."

"She's working."

"What's her job?" Makar said with a cheerless smile.

"She's a haulier in a mine. Members of our organisation helped her to find work. But, of course, she doesn't suspect who it was that helped her. And I must say she is working very well, very well indeed, I should say. She is behaving herself decently, she hasn't made any new acquaintances, and so far none of her old acquaintances have visited her."

"Who might visit her then?" Nagulnov asked quietly.

His manner was perfectly calm, only his left eyelid was twitching rapidly.

"All kinds of people. . . . Some old friends of Timofei's, for instance. Or do you think that's out of the question? But it seems to me that the woman has taken a fresh attitude to life, turned over a new leaf, and you needn't worry about her, Comrade Nagulnov."

"What makes you think I'm worried about her?" Nagulnov asked even quieter, and stood up leaning forward and gripping the edge of the table with his long hands.

His face was chalk-white and the muscles in his cheeks were twitching rapidly. Choosing his words, he said very slowly: "Have you come to do a job, Comrade Orator? Well, go and do it. There's no need to console me, I don't need any of your consolations! And we don't need any of your warnings either. It's our business whether we go out at night or in the day-time. We'll get along somehow without any damn fool instructions and without nursemaids! Get me! And now buzz off. You've done a bit too much talking as it is, pouring your heart out to us—and you call yourself a GPU man! I'm not so sure now whether you're really a member of the regional GPU, or what you pretend to be—a cattle buyer, a dealer, or what we call, a knacker."

The silent Khizhnyak regarded his embarrassed chief with a certain malicious pleasure. Nagulnov stepped out from behind the table, straightened his tunic under his belt and walked to the door, as smart and upright as ever, with perhaps even a swagger of pride in his military bearing.

After his departure there was an awkward silence in the room for a minute or two.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned his wife," said Boiko-Glukhov, scratching the bridge of his nose with the nail of his little finger. "He still seems to be missing her."

"No, you shouldn't have," Razmyotnov agreed. "Our Makar's a prickly bird and he doesn't like people breaking into his private world and messing it up with their dirty boots."

"Well, never mind, he'll forget it," Khizhnyak said appeasingly and reached for the door latch.

To smooth things out a little, Razmyotnov asked: "Comrade Glukhov, tell me what you mean to do about this cattle buying. Are you really buying it or are you just going round the cottages discussing prices?"

The artless simplicity of the question restored Boiko-Glukhov's good humour and the dimples twinkled again in his plump cheeks.

"There's a real farmer for you! Yes, indeed we're buying the cattle and paying in full for it. You needn't worry about that. We send the cattle off to Shakhty and the miners there will be only too glad to eat the meat. But they won't thank us for it because they won't know what an important organisation bought them such well fattened animals. So that's that, chum!"

When he had seen the visitors off, Razmyotnov sat for a long time at his table with his elbows wide apart and his cheeks resting on his fists. Who of the villagers could be mixed up with that damned Polovtsev? He

went over all the men of Gremyachy Log in his mind and could attach no real suspicion to any of them.

Razmyotnov got up from the table to stretch his legs, walked from the door to the window and back two or three times and suddenly stopped in the middle of the room as though he had run into an invisible obstacle. That fat fellow will have put Makar on edge again, he thought worriedly. What the hell did he have to tell him about Lushka for! Suppose Makar feels the urge and goes riding off to Shakhty to see her? He's been keeping pretty quiet lately and not showing anything, but I reckon he's been drinking by himself at night. . . .

For a few days Razmyotnov lived in a state of apprehension. What would Makar do? And when on Saturday evening in Davidov's presence Nagulnov announced that he had been authorised by the district committee to visit Martinovskaya stanitsa to inspect the work of one of the Don country's first machine and tractor stations, Razmyotnov gave an inward gasp. Makar's done for! He's going to see Lushka. And I thought he was a man with pride!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Back in the spring, when even on the northern side of the fences the last snow was oozing transparent moisture and beginning to settle, a pair of wild rock-pigeons had taken a liking to Razmyotnov's backyard. They had circled for a long time over the cottage, flying lower and lower until they came to earth just by the cellar. Then they had soared up lightly and perched on the roof of the cottage. For a long time they sat warily turning their heads in all directions, looking round and getting used to their new surroundings; then the male bird, lifting his purple feet high with elegant

fastidiousness, picked his way through the dirty chalk scattered round the chimney, drew his head in and slightly back and, displaying a dull rainbow of plumage on his swelling crop, struck up a tentative cooing. His mate slithered down the roof and with two loud flaps of her wings flew in a semi-circle and settled on the wooden cornice round the window of Razmyotnov's best room, which had warped and stood away from the wall. What else could those two flaps of her wings mean but an invitation to her mate to follow her?

At midday Razmyotnov came home to have his dinner and through the wicket gate saw the two pigeons by his doorstep. The hen was mincing hurriedly on dainty legs round the edge of a puddle of thaw water, pecking at something as she went. The cock would take a short run after her, then stop for a little while, go round in a circle bowing and almost touching the ground with his beak and crop, coo energetically, and once again set off in pursuit, fanning out his tail and pressing his body to the damp and still wintry earth. He kept stubbornly to one side in an attempt to head the hen-pigeon away from the puddle.

Razmyotnov stole past only two paces away from them, but the pigeons merely moved aside a little without showing any intention of flying. By the time he reached his doorstep Razmyotnov had decided with boyishly joyful enthusiasm, these are no passing guests, they're going to make their home here. Then smiling bitterly to himself, he murmured: "Must be the good luck I've been waiting for all this time."

He scooped a handful of wheat from the cornbin and sprinkled it round the window.

All the morning Razmyotnov had been grim and sombre. The preparations for the sowing and sorting the seeds were not going well. Davidov had been called away to the stanitsa, Nagulnov had ridden out into the

fields to make a personal inspection of the land that was to be sown, and by midday Razmyotnov had managed to have a terrible row with two of the team-leaders and the storekeeper. When he sat down to table at home and, forgetful of the soup growing cold in his plate, started watching the pigeons, his face lightened a little under the ruddy tan it had already acquired from the searing winds of spring, but his heart grew even heavier.

Smiling wistfully with misty eyes he watched the beautiful young hen-pigeon greedily pecking at the wheat while her sturdy mate kept running round in circles in front of her, displaying tireless energy without pecking a single grain himself.

Twenty years ago he, Andrei, as young and sturdy as this cock-pigeon, had preened himself before his sweetheart. Then had come marriage, service in the army, the war. . . . With what terrible and disappointing haste had life swept by! Thinking of his wife and son, Razmyotnov murmured sadly: "I didn't see much of you when you were alive, my dear ones, and I don't visit you often now."

The cock-pigeon had no time for food that brilliant April day. And neither had Andrei Razmyotnov. His eyes were no longer misty but blinded with tears as he stared out of the window and saw not the pigeons, not the tender blue undertones of spring beyond the window-frame but the sad image of the one woman whom he had really loved, more than life itself, it seemed, without ever knowing the fulness of that love, and from whom black death had parted him twelve years ago on just such a sparkling April day as this.

Razmyotnov munched a piece of bread with his head sunk low over his bowl, for he did not want his mother to see the tears rolling slowly down his cheeks and adding salt to the cabbage soup that was oversalted

already. Twice he lifted his spoon, and twice let it fall on the table from his strangely weak and shaking hand.

It sometimes happens in life that human happiness and even the brief happiness of birds rouses not envy in a wounded heart, not a condescending smile, but agonising, grief-filled memories.... Razmyotnov rose resolutely from the table, turning his back to his mother, put on his padded jacket and crumpled his lambskin cap in his hands.

"Lord be with us, mother, but I don't feel like eating today somehow."

"If you don't want your soup, shall I give you some porridge and sour milk?"

"No, I don't want anything."

"Are you in trouble, dear?" his mother asked cautiously.

"What trouble! I'm in no trouble. I was once, but it's over and done with now."

"You've always been so secretive, Andrei.... You never tell your mother anything, never complain. You seem to have got a pebble in your heart."

"You brought me into the world, mother, so you've only yourself to blame. That's the way you made me and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Go along then," said the old woman, pursing her faded lips.

Razmyotnov went out of the gate, and turned not right, towards the village Soviet, but left, into the steppe. With a swinging but unhurried stride he cut straight across the fields towards another Gremyachy Log, where since times long past only the dead had known a crowded but peaceful dwelling. The graveyard was unfenced. In those difficult years the dead were not in favour with the living. The old blackened crosses were crooked or fallen, some lay face downwards, others face upwards. Not a single grave was tended and the

east wind sadly stirred dead weeds on the clayey mounds and ran caressing fingers through the strands of wilted colourless wormwood. A mingled scent of decay, rotting grasses, and thawed black earth hung persistently over the graves.

The living feel sad in any graveyard at any time of the year, but the keenest grief dwells there constantly in early spring and late autumn.

Razmyotnov followed a cattle track across the northern boundary of the graveyard, to a place where it had once been the custom to bury suicides, halted beside a familiar grave with sunken edges, and removed the cap from his grey bowed head. Only the larks disturbed the pensive stillness that hung over this forgotten patch of earth.

Why had Andrei come here on this spring day of brilliant sunshine, filled to the brim with awakening life? To stand clenching his short strong fingers and gritting his teeth and to stare with half-closed eyes beyond the misty rim of the horizon, as though striving to discern in that hazy distance his unforgotten youth and short-lived happiness? Perhaps so. The dead but beloved past can always be seen well from a graveyard or in the dumb shadows of a sleepless night.

Since that time Razmyotnov had taken the pair of pigeons under his vigilant protection. Twice a day he scattered a handful of wheat under the window and stood on guard, shooing away intruding hens until the pigeons had eaten their fill. Early in the morning he would sit for a long time on the threshold of the barn, smoking and silently watching the new tenants carrying bits of straw, twigs and tufts of hair left by a moulting ball from the fence behind the projecting window cornice. Soon the roughly fashioned nest was ready and

Razmyotnov sighed with relief. "They've made their home. They won't fly away now."

Two weeks later the hen-pigeon failed to fly down for her feed. She must be sitting, it looks as if we're going to have an addition to the household, Razmyotnov said smiling to himself.

With the arrival of the pigeons his duties noticeably increased. He had to feed them at the right time, and change the water in their bowl, for the puddle by the doorstep quickly dried, and on top of everything, it was of vital importance to maintain a guard over the safety of the pitifully helpless birds.

One day as he approached the house on his way back from the fields, Razmyotnov noticed their old cat—his mother's darling—slither on its belly over the straw thatch of the cottage roof, then jump lightly on to the half-open shutter and with threshing tail crouch to make its spring. The pigeon was sitting motionless in its nest with its back to the cat and seemed unaware of the danger, though death lurked not more than a few inches away.

Razmyotnov tugged the revolver out of his pocket and ran forward on tiptoe, holding his breath and keeping his narrowed eyes fixed on the cat. When the cat drew back a little with a twitching of the forepaws, a shot rang out and the shutter jerked slightly. The pigeon flew up and the cat dropped head downwards, a bullet through its body, on to the earthen bank round the cottage.

At the sound of the shot Razmyotnov's mother ran out into the yard.

"Where's the spade, mother?" Razmyotnov enquired as though nothing had happened.

He was holding the dead cat up by the tail and frowning with distaste.

The old woman began to wail, wringing her hands in despair.

"Oh, you murderer! You've no mercy on any living thing! It's all the same to you and Makar whether you kill a man or a cat! You've got into the way of it, you blood-thirsty devils, you can't go a day without killing any more than without tobacco!"

"Now then, don't make a fuss!" her son interrupted her sternly. "No cats in our house from now on! And you keep off Makar and me. We're getting very touchy about being called names. It's kindness that makes us shoot straight when we kill these filthy creatures, with two legs or four, that won't let other creatures live. Understand that, mother? Now go inside. Upset yourself indoors. As chairman of the village Soviet, I categorically forbid you to make a fuss and call me names in the yard."

For a week his mother would not speak to him, but to Razmyotnov her silence was a gift. In the course of the week he killed off all the tom-cats and she-cats in the neighbourhood and ensured the safety of his pigeons for a long time to come. One day Davidov came into the village Soviet and asked: "What's all the shooting going on around here? I hear revolver shots every day. What are you upsetting people for, I want to know. If you've got to test your weapon, go out in the steppe and blaze away out there. This won't do at all, and that's a fact, Andrei!"

"I'm getting rid of the cats," Razmyotnov answered sombrely. "They're a proper menace, the dratted creatures!"

Davidov raised his sun-bleached brows in amazement.

"What cats?"

"All kinds. Black, tabby and piebald. Any cat I happen to see."

Davidov's upper lip began to tremble—the first sign that he was fighting with all his might against an explosion of irrestrainable laughter. Aware of this, Razmyotnov frowned and held out his hand in a gesture of warning and alarm.

"Wait a bit before you laugh, sailor! Find out what's up first!"

"What is up?" Davidov asked, wincing and almost weeping with laughter. "Haven't you fulfilled the pelt delivery plan? Not enough pelts coming in, eh? So you've decided to do your bit? Oh, Andrei! I can't stand this any longer, own up at once or I'll die here on the spot, over your desk. . . ."

Davidov dropped his head on his arms and his broad shoulder-blades worked vigorously in his back. At this Razmyotnov leapt to his feet as though he had been stung, and shouted: "You fool! You townbred fool! My pigeons are sitting. Soon their young will be hatching out, and you start burbling about 'doing your bit for the pelt delivery plan'! . . . What the hell has all that rubbish got to do with me—furs, hooves and all the rest of it! I've got some pigeons come to live with me, so I'm looking after them properly. Now, laugh to your heart's content."

Prepared for fresh scorn, Razmyotnov was surprised at the impression that his words made on Davidov. Davidov wiped his eyes hastily and asked with lively interest: "What pigeons? Where did you get 'em?"

"What pigeons?" "What cats?" "Where did you get them?" What a lot of damn fool questions you've started asking these days, Semyon!" Razmyotnov burst out indignantly. "They're just ordinary pigeons with two legs, two wings and a head each. On the other end they've got a tail and they both wear feathers and no boots. They're so poor they go about barefoot even in winter. That satisfy you?"

"I don't mean that, I'm asking whether they're thoroughbreds or not. When I was a kid I used to keep pigeons myself, and that's a fact. That's why I'm interested in what breed they are. Tumblers or pouters, or maybe they're monks or gulls. And where did you get them from?"

By this time Razmyotnov was smiling and stroking his moustache. "They flew over from someone else's threshing floor, so I reckon their breed might be called 'threshers', but seeing they came without any invitation, we might call them 'cadgers' or 'scroungers', because they live on my corn and don't find any food for themselves. . . . In a word, you can put them down for any breed you like."

"What colour are they?" Davidov questioned him seriously.

"The usual pigeon colour."

"Such as?"

"Like a ripe plum before anyone touches it, kind of smoky blue."

"Oh, rocks!" Davidov sounded disappointed. But the next minute he was rubbing his hands with excitement. "But rock-pigeons can be hot stuff sometimes, mate! I must have a look. This is very interesting, and that's a fact."

"Drop in, I'll be glad to see you."

A few days after this conversation Razmyotnov was stopped in the street by a bunch of youngsters. The boldest of them kept at a safe distance and asked in a squeaky little voice: "Uncle Andrei, is it you who's killing cats for sale?"

"Wha-a-a-t?!" Razmyotnov advanced threateningly on the youngsters.

The group scattered in all directions, but a minute or two later it gathered again, a tight little bunch.

"Who's been telling you about cats?" Razmyotnov demanded checking his indignation.

But the children lowered their heads dumbly, each tracing patterns with his bare feet in the cold roadside dust, the first dust of the year, and exchanging glances.

At length the boy who had asked the first question regained his courage. Drawing his head into his puny shoulders, he squeaked: "Mummy says you're shooting cats with a gun."

"Well, so I am, but I'm not selling 'em! That's a different matter, my lad."

"She said: 'Our chairman's downing them as if he wanted them for sale. I wish he'd kill our cat because he's prowling after the doves.'"

"Now, that's a different matter, sonny!" Razmyotnov exclaimed, livening up. "So your cat goes prowling after pigeons, does he? Who do you belong to, lad? What's your name?"

"My daddy's Chebakov, Yerofei Vasilyevich, and my name's Timoshka."

"Well, take me home with you, Timoshka. We'll put paid to your cat right away, specially as your ma wants us to, herself."

The noble initiative shown by Razmyotnov for the sake of the protection of the Chebakov pigeons neither brought him success nor enhanced his reputation. Quite the opposite, in fact. Accompanied by the chirruping flock of youngsters, Razmyotnov made his way unhurriedly towards the cottage of Yerofei Chebakov, not suspecting for a moment that something very unpleasant awaited him there. Scarcely had he turned the corner of the street, shuffling along cautiously in an effort not to tread on the bare feet of his jostling escort, when an old woman, Yerofei's mother, appeared on the steps of the house.

The tall and portly old woman stood majestically on the steps, frowning ominously and clasping to her bosom a huge ginger cat that evidently got all the food it wanted.

"Hullo, grandma!" Razmyotnov greeted the old woman politely out of respect for her age and brushed his grey lambskin cap lightly with his fingers.

"The Lord be praised. What have you come for, village ataman? Out with it!" the old woman boomed in a deep voice.

"I've come about the cat. The youngsters tell me he goes after the pigeons. Hand him over and I'll give him a tribunal straight away. This is what we'll say to him, the villain: 'Sentence final, no appeal permitted!'"

"And what law is this? Has Soviet power made it a law to have all cats destroyed?"

Razmyotnov smiled.

"What the dickens do you need a law for? If the cat's a bandit, if he's plundering and killing all kinds of birds, what he needs is capital punishment, and that's that! We've only got one law for bandits: 'Guided by our revolutionary conscience', and done with it! Now, there's no need to beat about the bush, hand over your cat, gran', and I'll make short work of him."

"And who's going to catch the mice in our barn? Perhaps you'll volunteer for the job?"

"I've got my own work to do. You aren't busy, so you deal with the mice instead of wasting your time praying and bending your back in front of the icon."

"You're too young to teach me!" the old woman boomed. "How our Cossacks could choose such a rotten fellow as you for their chairman! Do you know that in the old days not a single village ataman ever managed to have the last word with me?! Why, I'll pack you out of my yard in a minute and you won't know what's happened till you wake up in the street!"

A piebald puppy pranced out from under the barn at the sound of the old woman's powerful voice and started yapping loudly. Razmyotnov stood by the steps and calmly rolled himself a cigarette. Judging by the size of it, he had no intention of abandoning his position for some time yet. As long and broad as a man's forefinger, the cigarette seemed designed for an all-embracing discussion. But fate had ordained otherwise.

Razmyotnov began in a calm and reasonable tone. "You're quite right, gran'. The Cossacks were clean crazy when they picked me for chairman. It's no wonder they say the Cossack wears his brain back to front. But don't let it grieve you. I'll soon be resigning from my post."

"High time, too!"

"That's what I'm saying, it is high time. But meanwhile, gran', say good-bye to your cat and place him in my reliable chairman's hands."

"You've shot all the cats in the village as it is. There'll soon be so many mice about that you'll be the first one to have them gnawing your toe-nails at night."

"Oh, no, I shan't!" Razmyotnov declared firmly. "My nails are so hard that even your scrag-hound there would break his teeth on 'em. But hand over that cat, I've no time for bargaining. Make the sign of the cross over him and hand him over nicely."

The gnarled brown fingers and thumb of the old woman's right hand formed a well-known sign of refusal while her left clutched the cat so devotedly to her bosom that the animal let out a plaintive screech and began to scratch and spit wildly. The wall of children that had formed behind Razmyotnov tittered gleefully. Their sympathies were obviously on Razmyotnov's side. But they fell silent at once, as if by word of command, when the old woman, having soothed the apprehensive

cat, shouted: "Get out of here, you unclean spirit, you cursed heathen! Go, while the going's good, or I'll teach you where trouble comes from!"

Razmyotnov stuck down the edge of his cigarette, slowly and carefully drawing his tongue along the ragged edge of the strip of newspaper, looked up from under lowered brows at the belligerent old woman and even permitted himself a nonchalant smile. If the truth were known, he found great pleasure, even delight in his verbal battles with all the old women of the village, except his mother. In spite of his age, he still retained a flicker of youthful Cossack mischief, a miraculously preserved spark of bluff humour. And now, too, he remained true to his reckless habit. When he had lighted up and taken two deep draws in quick succession, he said in a friendly, almost delighted tone: "What a lovely little voice you've got, Granny Ignatyevna! I could listen to you for a hundred years and still want to hear some more! I wouldn't eat or drink, I'd just go on making you shout from morning to night . . . Yes, that's a voice and no kidding! Big and booming, just like the old deacon's voice in the stanitsa, or our collective-farm stallion's, the one we call Flower. From now on I'm going to call you not Granny Ignatyevna but Granny Flower. Let's strike a bargain. If we need someone to call the people together for a meeting and you bawl out across the square at the top of your voice, we'll credit you with two workday units for it. . . ."

Razmyotnov did not manage to finish his sentence. The infuriated old woman grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck and swung her arm with masculine force. Razmyotnov dodged aside in alarm and the cat, its four paws outspread, its green eyes revolving and splenic miaows coming from somewhere in the region of its stomach flew past him, landed springily and shaking out its huge fox-like tail, made a wild dash for the veg-

etable patch. The puppy charged after it, uttering hysterical squeals and flapping its ears, and after the puppy went the whole howling bunch of children. The cat cleared the fence as though lifted by the wind, the puppy, unable to surmount so huge an obstacle, raced at top speed for its favourite escape hole; the boys, assaulting the flimsy structure in a consorted rush, brought it creaking to the ground.

The cat flashed by along the cucumber beds and the rows of tomatoes and cabbage like greased lightning, and Razmyotnov, bubbling with delight, squatted on his haunches, slapped his knees and bawled: "Hold him! Don't let him get away! Catch him, I know what he's up to!"

Razmyotnov's surprise was boundless when, chancing to glance at the porch, he saw Granny Ignatyevna, clasping her heaving bosom and shaking with laughter. Slowly she wiped her eyes with the corners of her kerchief and, with the laughter still bubbling in her, said hoarsely: "Andrei Razmyotnov! You or the village Soviet are going to pay me for the damage! By this evening I'll have counted up how much these bandits you brought here have trampled on, then you can foot the bill!"

Andrei went over to the steps and looking up at the old woman with pleading eyes said: "I'll pay you in full either out of my chairman's wages or this autumn from our vegetable patch! But in return you must give me the pigeons whose nest your cat robbed. My own will soon have a pair of young ones and the pair you give me will make a proper family."

"Take them for Lord's sake, all of them if you like. They're no good to me, they only make my fowls go hungry."

Razmyotnov turned towards the vegetable patch and shouted: "Call it a day, lads!"

Ten minutes later he was making his way home, but not through the streets; he went along the bank of the stream to avoid attracting the attention of the idle Gremyachy women. A fresh, rather cold wind was blowing. Razmyotnov placed the pair of warm, heavy-cropped pigeons in his lambskin hat, covered the hat with the hem of his jacket and, glancing furtively this way and that, smiled to himself in embarrassment, and the wind, a cold wind from the north, stirred his grizzled forelock.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Two days before the Party meeting Nagulnov was visited by six women of the collective farm. It was early morning and the women, not wishing to enter the cottage in a crowd, seated themselves sedately on the steps of the porch and on the earthen ledge round the cottage walls. Kondrat Maidannikov's wife adjusted her clean, well-blued kerchief and asked: "Shall I go in and see him, women?"

"Go on, then, since you've volunteered," Agafon Dubtsov's wife, who was sitting on the bottom step, answered for them all.

Makar was shaving in his room. His back bent almost double, he was seated awkwardly in front of a tiny scrap of looking-glass propped precariously against a flowerpot. The old, blunt razor scraped the hard black bristle from Makar's dark cheeks with an electric crackle and Makar frowned painfully, grunted and sometimes uttered low groans, wiping the tears that came to his eyes on the sleeve of his undershirt. He had contrived to cut himself in several places and the thin lather on his cheeks was no longer white but a blotchy pink. The dim reflection of his face in the glass expressed various

feelings ranging from dull resignation to restrained agony and frenzied rage; in its desperate determination it resembled at times the face of a man bent on committing suicide with the help of a razor.

Maidannikov's wife entered the room with a quiet greeting. Makar turned his frowning, pain-distorted and blood-stained face quickly towards her and with a gasp of fright the poor woman backed away to the door.

"Mercy on you! How did you get all that blood over yourself? You'd better go and have a wash. You're bleeding like a stuck pig!"

"Don't get scared, you silly baggage. Sit down." Makar greeted her with a sweet smile. "I've cut myself because the razor's blunt. Ought to have thrown it away long ago, but I can't. Got used to the damn thing. It's been through two wars with me, been making me handsome for fifteen years. How can I part with it now? Take a seat, I'll be through in a jiffy."

"So your razor's blunt, is it?" Maidannikov's wife echoed, not knowing what to say, and sat down timidly on a bench, trying not to look in his direction:

"Terrible blunt! Blunt as a..." Makar swallowed the word, coughed twice and went on hastily: "Might as well be scraping myself blindfold! But what brings you here at the crack o' dawn? What's the trouble? Kondrat had a stroke or something?"

"No, he's all right. I'm not alone, there are six of us here to see you."

"What about?"

"Well, the day after tomorrow you'll be considering taking our husbands into your Party, so we wanted to put the school to rights for the day."

"Did you think of this yourselves or did your husbands tell you?"

"Haven't we any brains of our own? You do set us low, Comrade Nagulnov!"

"Well, if you thought of it yourselves, it's a good idea."

"We want to plaster and whitewash it inside and out."

"Fine! I give my full approval, but remember, it won't count as work. You're doing it for the community."

"We don't expect any payment—it's for love. But you tell our team-leader not to come badgering us to go and work in the fields. There are six of us, so write our names down on a bit of paper."

"No need to write anything down. I'll tell the team-leader myself. We have enough red tape and scribbling as it is."

Maidannikov's wife rose and stood in silence for a moment, then shot a sidelong glance at Makar and smiled.

"My man's just as queer a bird as you are. Even worse.... Folk say he goes a shaving himself every blessed day out there in the fields, and when he comes home he starts trying on his shirts. He's only got three all told, but he plays about trying first one, then another. He can't make up his mind which to wear for joining the Party on Sunday. I laugh at him. 'You're like a girl that's to be wed,' I says. And he gets so ratty! But he don't show it, except sometimes when I start making fun of him; then he gives me such a look, and I know he's going to let fly with some bad words, so I go away in case I upset him altogether."

Makar gave a short laugh and his eyes softened.

"This affair means more to your husband, my good woman, than getting married does to any girl. A wedding's a piddling affair. Wed and wasted, as the saying goes, and that's the end of it. But the Party, my girl, there's music in that word.... Yes, music.... But you wouldn't understand anyway! You'd be as much at sea in the Party's ideas and discussions as a cockroach in

cabbage soup. What's the use of my talking to you, it's a waste of breath. To put it in a nutshell, the Party is a great thing, and that's my last word. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Makar, but mind you tell them to bring us about ten cartloads of clay."

"I will."

"And some chalk for doing the walls."

"I will."

"And a pair of horses and some boys for pounding the clay."

"Mebbe you'd like us to bring you a dozen plasterers from Rostov as well?" Makar challenged her cunningly and, holding his razor aloft, swung round to face her with a wolf-like twist of his whole body.

"We'll do the plastering ourselves, but you must give us horses or we won't manage by Sunday."

Makar sighed. "You, women, are great ones for riding on other folk's backs! All right, we'll give you the horses, we'll give you everything, but for goodness sake go away! You've made me cut myself twice already. If I go on talking to you two minutes more, there won't be any flesh left on me at all. Is that clear?"

There was such pleading in Makar's manly voice that Maidannikov's wife turned quickly and with a "Good-bye, then!" left the room. But a second later the door opened again.

"I'm sorry, Makar. . . ."

"What else do you want?" there was now unceasing annoyance in Makar's voice.

"I forgot to say thank you very much."

The door closed with a bang. Makar gave a start and once more drove the razor deep into his flesh.

"Thank yourself, you silly fool, not me!" he shouted after her, then relapsed into long and silent laughter.

And this trifle amused the always grim and stern Makar so much that he smiled to himself throughout the

day, whenever he remembered his early-morning visitor and her ill-timed "thank you very much".

Rarely had the weather been so fine, sunny and windless as now. By Saturday evening the school walls shone a spotless white on the outside, while the floors inside, after a scrubbing and scouring with broken brick, were so clean that all who entered felt an urge to walk on tiptoe.

The open Party meeting had been fixed for six in the evening, but by four o'clock over a hundred and fifty people had gathered in the school and, though all the windows and doors were wide open, every class-room was reeking with the bitter smell of home-grown tobacco and male sweat, powerful as raw alcohol, and the scent of cheap face-cream and equally cheap soap that arose from the tight bunch of girls and women, who were standing together arrayed in all their finery.

It was the first time there had ever been an open Party meeting in Gremyachy Log to consider the admission to the Party of any new members, and now the new members were actually village folk; so by six in the evening the whole village, except for children and those confined to their beds, was either in the school or near it. The field camps were deserted. Everyone had come to the village. Even the village herdsman Grandad Agei had left his cattle in the care of his boy and come to school in his Sunday best with his beard carefully combed and wearing a pair of old-fashioned, badly battered boots whose tops bulged like balloons. The sight of him actually wearing boots and so carefully turned out, without his whip and canvas bag over his shoulder, was so unusual that many of the older Cossacks failed to recognise him at first and greeted him as if he were a stranger.

At six o'clock sharp Makar Nagulnov stood up at a table covered with a red sateen table-cloth and surveyed the crowded rows of collective farmers sitting squeezed together at the desks and standing in the passages between them. The muffled hum of voices and the squeals of female laughter coming from the back row did not subside. Then Makar lifted his hand high:

"Now then, simmer down a bit, you with the loud voices, specially the women! I request you to maintain as much silence as possible and I hereby declare the open Party meeting of the Gremyachy group of the C.P.S.U. (B.)—open. The first speaker is Comrade Nagulnov. In other words, me. There is only one question on our agenda—the admission to the Party of our new members. We have received a certain number of applications, and these include an application from our fellow villager Kondrat Maidannikov, who you all know as well as you know yourselves. But the Party rules and regulations say it's got to be discussed. I ask you all, comrades and citizens, whether you're Party members or not, to speak on the subject of Kondrat, just how and what you think, those who're for and also anyone who may be against. If you speak against, it's called an objection. 'I raise an objection against Kondrat Maidannikov,' you say, and then you've got to state some facts as to why Maidannikov's not worthy to be in the Party. We shall need pernicious facts. They're the only kind we can accept for consideration. Slinging a lot of mud at a man without any facts to go on is just a waste of time. We shan't even consider such nonsense. But to start with, I will read Kondrat Maidannikov's application, then he'll tell us about his autobiography, that is, his description of his past, present and future life, and then you can have a go, to the best of your ability, as far as concerns our Comrade Maidannikov. Is it clear

what's to be done? It is. Very well. I shall proceed, that is, I shall read the application."

Nagulnov read out the application, then laid the sheet of paper flat on the table and placed his long dark hand upon it. Many were the sleepless nights and agonising meditations which that sheet, torn from a school exercise book, had cost Kondrat. And now as he looked at the Communists sitting at the table and at his neighbours at the desks with an unusually timid glance he felt so nervous that large drops of sweat broke out on his forehead and his face looked as if it had been splashed with rain.

In a few halting words that he chose with great difficulty, he related his life-story, frowning and smiling wretchedly at the same time. Lyubishkin could not help shouting out:

"What are you making such a mouthful of it for? What are you jibbing at? You've lived your life fine. Give it a bit more punch, Kondrat!"

"That's all I've got to say," Maidannikov replied quietly and sat down with a chilly shrug of his shoulders.

He felt as if he had emerged coatless from a stuffily warm cottage into a bitter frost.

After a short pause Davidov stood up. He spoke briefly but warmly about Maidannikov as a man whose hard work and example were an inspiration to other members of the farm, and in conclusion stated with conviction:

"He fully deserves to be a member of our Party, and that's a fact!"

Several other speakers talked of Maidannikov with warmth and goodwill. Now and then they were interrupted by approving shouts:

"Quite right!"

"He's a good farmer!"

"Sticks up for the farm's interests."

"He wouldn't waste a single kopek of public money, and if he did he'd put two back instead."

"There's not a bad thing you can say against him, no one would believe it."

Pale with emotion, Kondrat listened to the many flattering things that were said of him. It appeared that the opinion of the assembly was unanimous. But quite suddenly Grandad Shchukar rose, or rather bounced, to his feet and began:

"Dear citizens and old women! I'm all agin Kondrat! I'm not like other folk, I believes in friendship but I don't let it interfere with my judgement. That's the kind of man I am! You've been a paintin' up Kondrat here as if he were a saint in heaven! But I'm goin' to ask you, citizens, how can he be a saint if he's just as much a sinner as all the rest of us?"

"You're getting mixed up, grandad, like you always do! We aren't admitting him to heaven, but to the Party," Nagulnov corrected the old man, good-humouredly as yet.

But Grandad Shchukar was not the kind of man to be put down or reduced to confusion by a retort like that. He turned on Nagulnov with one eye glittering fiercely—the other was tied up with a grubby red handkerchief.

"You're a fine one, Makar my boy, at squashing good people! You should be working at an oil-mill, you should—as a press for squeezing the oil out of the sunflower seeds. . . . Why do you shut me up like this and not let me say a word! I'm not speakin' agin you, I'm not raising a dejection agin you, am I? So keep quiet, because what the Party says is encourage criticism and self-criticism for all you're worth. And what is self-criticism? In plain language it means criticism what begins at home. And what does that mean? It means that you've got to pinch a feller anywhere you like as

long as it hurts! Pinch him, the son-of-a-bitch, so he sweats salt from top to toe! That's what the word self-criticism means, as I understand it."

"That's enough!" Nagulnov interrupted him firmly. "Don't you go twisting words any way you like! Self-criticism means criticising yourself, that's what it means. When you have a collective-farm meeting, then you'll be welcome to get up and pinch yourself how and where you like, but just at the moment you sit down and keep quiet."

"Keep quiet yourself and don't go chucking my criticism back down my throat!" Grandad Shchukar squeaked in a high falsetto, losing his temper. "You're getting a lot too clever, Makar my boy! What's the blink-in' point in me callin' myself all kinds o' names? Why should I accuse myself of things? Have all the fools died out under Soviet power?... The old ones have, but so many new ones have been born there's no countin' 'em! They don't sow 'em nowadays, but they spread o' their own accord, like corn in the wind, and the harvest is too big for anyone to handle! Just take you, for instance, Makar my lad! . . ."

"Let me alone, we're not discussing me," Nagulnov said sternly. "You stick to the point, about Kondrat Maidannikov, and if you haven't got anything to say about that, shut up and sit quiet, like all decent folk."

"So you're decent and I'm not?" Grandad Shchukar asked sadly.

At this point someone sitting at the back boomed: "Why don't you tell us, you decent old man, where you picked up that baby in your old age, and why you can only see with one eye and the other's got a great big bruise on it? You're always a crowin' at other people like a cock on a fence, but you keep mum about yourself, you crafty old devil!"

A roar of laughter shook the school and died away at once as Davidov rose from his seat. His face was sombre and there was a ring of indignation in his voice when he said: "This isn't a comedy show, comrades. It's a Party meeting, that's a fact! If anyone wants to have fun they can go out on the village green. Now, will you keep to the point, grandpa, or do you wish to go on clowning?"

It was the first time Davidov had addressed Shchukar with such stinging politeness and this, perhaps, was why the old man lost his temper completely. He gave a little jump and stood poised at his desk like a young cockerel before a fight; his scanty beard began to shake with fury.

"Who's clowning? Me or that half-wit who's sittin' at the back and askin' stupid questions? What kind of an open meetin' do you call this when a man can't say a single word openly? Who do you think I am! Have I had my voting rights taken away or what? What I says on this here point of Kondrat is that I'm raisin' a big dejection agin him. We don't need such mēn in the Party, that's all I've got to say!"

"Why not, grandad?" Razmyotnov asked, choking with laughter.

"Because he's not worthy to be in the Party. And what are you laughin' at, white eyes? Picked up a button in the street and think it'll make you rich? If you can't see why Kondrat ain't worthy enough for the Party, I'll explain it to you categorically, and then maybe you'll stop grinning like a gelding at a bin of oats. You're fine ones at telling others, but what about yourselves? You the chairman of the village Soviet, an important figure, you ought to be settin' an example to old and young, and how do you behave? Blow yourself out with stupid laughter at a meetin' till you're blue as a turkey-cock! What kind of a chairman are you and how

dare you laugh when Kondrat's fate's a hangin' in the balance? Just try and think it out. Which of us is more serious, you or me? It's a pity Makar's put a ban on me using the foreign words I learned in his dictionary, my lad, or I'd have given you such a pastin' with them words that you'd never be able to find out what I was talkin' about! I'm agin Kondrat a goin' into the Party because he's a small property-owner and you'll never make him into anythin' else even if you squeeze him in a press! A mess you will get, what's called 'chaff', scientifically speakin', but a Communist—never!"

"Why won't they get a Communist out of me, grandpa?" Maidannikov asked in a voice quivering with injury.

Grandad Shchukar screwed up his eyes cunningly. "As if you didn't know?"

"Well, I don't. And you'd better explain properly to me and the other citizens just why I'm not worthy. But mind you tell the plain and honest truth, without any of your yarns."

"Have I ever told a lie? Have I ever made up any yarns?" Shchukar gave a sigh that was heard all over the school, and shook his head bitterly. "All my long life I've been a slammin' the truth into people, and that's the reason, Kondrat my boy, why some folk in this world have got it in for me. Your old father, he used to say: 'If Shchukar's a liar, is there anybody who tells the truth?' That's the high opinion he had of me! It's a pity he's dead, or he'd be here to bear out what I'm a sayin' at this moment, may the Lord rest his soul!"

Shchukar crossed himself and was about to shed a tear but changed his mind.

"Explain what you meant about me. Never mind my father. Just what have you got against me?" Maidannikov demanded firmly.

The restrained murmur of disapproval, which judging by some of the remarks that could be heard obviously referred to Shchukar, caused him no embarrassment whatsoever. Like an experienced beekeeper lending an accustomed ear to the disturbed buzzing of a large hive, he maintained an attitude of complete and unruffled calm. Lifting his hands in a gentle and placatory gesture, he said: "Wait one minute and I'll explain just how things are. And you, citizens and dear old women, keep your chatter to yourselves, because you won't knock me off my train o' thought, no matter what you say. Something hissed behind me just now. It sounded like a snake. I heard it say: 'The old devil's got nothin' to do, so he...' But I know what snake that was a whisperin'. That, dear citizens and old women, was Agafon Dubtsov hissin' at me like a serpent from the underworld! He wants to confuse my memory and get me all mixed up so I shan't say anythin' about him. But he won't get no favours like that out of me, he's picked the wrong one for that! Agafon is after wrigglin' into the Party, too, like a snake does into a cellar, to have a drink o' milk, but I'll raise a dejection agin him in a minute, and it'll be a lot fiercer than this here one I'm a raisin' agin Kondrat. I know a thing or two about Agafon, too, that'll make you gasp when you hear it, and I reckon there's some of you here will go off in a dead faint."

Nagulnov tapped an empty glass with his pencil and said crossly: "You're all tangled up in your tangled ideas, grandad, so finish up now! You've had all the meeting's time to yourself as it is. Have a little conscience, man!"

"Are you trying to shut me up again, Makar?" Grandad Shchukar wailed in a tearful voice. "Just because you're secretary of the Party group, you think you can sit on me? Well, you won't! There's no such rule in the Party regulations that forbids a man to have his say."

That I know! How can you bring yourself to tell me I got no conscience, how can you even speak such a thing? You ought to have put some conscience into that Lushka of yours before she flicked up her skirt at you and took herself off no one knows where. Why, even my old woman has never told me I lack a conscience. That's a mortal insult, that is, Makar my boy!"

Shchukar shed his cherished tear after all, then wiped his eyes on his sleeve and continued with all his former zest:

"But I'm the kind of man what'll speak his mind to anyone, and at the next closed Party meeting I'll be after your tail, Makar, and after it so quick you won't wriggle away from me. You've picked the wrong man for that! I'm a terrible feller when I'm roused! If anyone ought to know that you ought to. Why, we're bosom pals, we are, the whole village knows that. And we've been pals a long time, so you'd better keep right out of the way of me and my criticism and self-criticism! I don't let no one off. So bear that in mind, all you people who want to shovel dirt into the Party!"

Raising his left eyebrow, Nagulnov turned to Davidov and whispered: "Shall we chuck him out? He'll wreck the meeting! Why, didn't you think of sending him off somewhere for the day! Now the old fellow's got a bee in his bonnet, there'll be no stopping him."

But Davidov was using one hand to shield his face with a newspaper and the other to wipe his tears. Unable to speak for laughing, he merely shook his head. Nagulnov shrugged in great annoyance and again fixed his angry gaze on Grandad Shchukar. The old man was still chattering away as fast as ever, almost choking in his haste.

"Since this here is an open meetin', Kondrat my boy, you've got to be just as open in what you says. When you joined the collective farm and took your bullocks

along to hand 'em in, did you cry bitter tears over 'em or not?"

"That question's got nothing to do with the matter!" Dyomka Ushakov shouted.

"It's a daft question! What are you pecking at eggshells for?" Ustin Rykalin backed him up.

"It isn't a daft question! I'm not peckin' at no eggshell, I'm askin' for the truth! And you can shut up, peace-maker!" Grandad Shchukar roared, growing purple in the effort to make himself heard.

When silence was eventually restored, he began again in a soft, insinuating whisper: "Maybe you don't remember, Kondrat, but I do. I remember the way you was drivin' your bullocks along to the common pen that mornin' and your eyes was as big as my fist and red as a rabbit's, or an old dog's, say, when he's just woken up. Now just you answer me, like you was confessing to a priest, did that happen or didn't it?"

Maidannikov stood up, gave an embarrassed tug at his shirt, looked timidly at Grandad Shchukar with misty eyes, but replied in firm and measured tones: "Yes, it did happen. I won't pretend I didn't cry a bit. I was sorry to part with them. Those bullocks hadn't been passed on to me by my parents, I'd earned them with my own sweat. And it wasn't easy! But that's a thing of the past, grandpa! What harm can come to the Party from the tears I shed in the past?"

"What harm!" Shchukar exclaimed indignantly. "Where were you going with your bullocks, my boy? You, my lad, was marchin' towards socialism, that's where you was a goin'! And after socialism, what shall we come to? We shall come to complete communism, that's what! I'm tellin' you straight! I've been brought up, as you might say, at Makar Nagulnov's house—all of you sittin' here know we're great friends, him and me—and I've been a pickin' up as many handfuls of

knowledge there as I can. At night either I reads various thick books, the serious ones without any pictures, or else I reads the dictionary and tries to remember all kinds o' learned words; but my old age, curse it, lets me down! My memory's got like a pair o' breaches with holes in all the pockets. No matter what you put in 'em, it all falls out! But if I gets hold of one of them thin booklets, that don't get away from me! I remembers every word in it! That's the kind of man I am when I gets down to these various reading matters! I've read a lot o' these here booklets and I know for sure, and I'm ready to argue with anyone about it, that after socialism the next thing to come will be communism, and I'm statin' that categorically! And that's where I have my doubts, Kondrat my boy.... You entered socialism sheddin' tears all over the place, so how are you a goin' to enter communism? You'll be wading in tears, as sure as God is holy! That's what'll happen to you, and I can see it now! So I ask you, citizens and dear old women, what good will he be to us in the Party, a cry-baby like him?"

The old man gave a cheerful titter and covered his toothless mouth with his hand.

"I can't stand all these serious folk, can't bear 'em, and certainly not in the Party! What bloomin' use are all these gloomy-guts to us? Just to give all good folk the hump, to break and spoil the Party rules with their long faces? In that case, I ask you, why don't you take Demid the Silent into the Party? There's a man who'd bring deadly gloom into your ranks! I've never seen anyone more serious than him in all my born days! But I considers we ought to have cheerful people in the Party, lively ones like me, but instead they keep on rakin' in all the serious kind, a reg'lar lot o' wiseacres. And what use are they? Just take Makar, for instance! Ever since he straightened up as if he'd swallowed a

poker back in 1918, he's been a goin' about as serious and stuck up as a crane in a marsh. You never hear a joke or a funny story from him, he's just a great big chunk o' solid gloom dressed up in trousers, that's what he is!"

"Don't start talking about me, grandad, don't go into my character, or I'll have to take action," Nagulnov warned him sternly.

But the old man, smiling blissfully and quite unable to escape from the spell of his own oratory, went on heatedly: "I'm not talkin' about you, not one little bit! Now this Kondrat here, take him for what he's worth, he rides around on a pencil as if it was a horse, that he does. All the time he's either writin' somethin' down or countin' somethin' up, as if there was no one else but him to do it. In Moscow, I reckon, the clever folk have got everythin' written up and down as clean and neat as you could wish, and there's no need for the likes of him to go a rackin' his brains over it! His job's twistin' the bullocks' tails, but he goes a blunderin' in where the real clever folk are, in Moscow. . . . And if you ask me, citizens and my dear old women, he does it all because of his great lack o' mental consciousness. Our Kondrat ain't got enough political developedness yet, and if he ain't got developedness, he'd better sit at home and develop himself on the quiet, without bein' in a hurry, and not try to get into the Party for the time bein'. Kondrat here can burst with indignation if he likes, but I'm categorical agin him and raise a big defection!"

And suddenly at this point Davidov heard Varya Kharlamova's voice from the next class-room. It was a long time since he had seen the girl, a long time since he had heard her deep pleasant voice.

"May I speak?"

"Step out in front so we can all see you," Nagulnov told her.

Varya pushed her way boldly through the tightly packed crowd, went up to the table and with a light touch of her sunburnt hands set her hair in place on the back of her head.

Davidov looked at her with quiet amazement and smiled. He could not believe his eyes. In a few months Varya had changed beyond recognition. No longer a gawky youngster, but a young woman, tall and holding her head proudly with its heavy knot of hair under a light blue kerchief, she stood half turned towards the table, waiting for silence and gazing over the crowded heads, her young handsome eyes slightly puckered at the corners, as if she were staring across the far expanses of the steppe. Gosh, she's blossomed out since spring, Davidov thought to himself.

Varya's eyes were shining excitedly, and so was her perspiring face, which had never known either powder or cream. But under the multitude of glances that were now directed upon her, her courage began to fail; her big hands plucked nervously at her lace handkerchief, her face burned a deep red and her resonant voice trembled with agitation as she turned towards Shchukar and began to speak.

"You're wrong as can be about Comrade Maidannikov, grandpa! And no one believes you when you say he's not worthy to be in the Party! I worked with him at the ploughing in spring and he ploughed better than anyone and more than anyone! He does his level best for the collective farm and you speak against him... You're an old man, but you argue like a stupid child."

"That's the stuff! Give it to him hot, Varya! He jingles away like a bell round a calf's neck and you can't hear a good word from anyone else because of his noise," Pavel Lyubishkin said in his effortless sonorous bass.

"Varya's right. Kondrat has more workday units to his credit than anyone on the farm. He's a real working Cossack!" old Beskhlebnov interposed.

And someone shouted from the passage in a hoarse young tenor: "If you won't take men like Kondrat for the Party, you'd better sign up Grandad Shchukar himself! The collective farm will start doing grand with him to lead us."

But Grandad Shchukar merely sniggered disdainfully into his scrubby unkempt little beard and stood at his desk as if he had taken root there, not even turning his head to glance at the speakers. And when silence was once again restored, he said calmly:

"Varya didn't ought to be here at all, because she ain't of age yet. She ought to be a playin' with her dolls in a shed somewhere. And she comes in here, the young magpie, to teach such wise old men as me what to think and what not to think. Life's gettin' all topsy-turvy! The chicks have started teachin' the hen. And the rest of you are a fine lot too. One starts a talkin' about workday units and sayin' Kondrat's earned so many you couldn't load 'em all in a cart. . . . But I ask you, what's workday units got to do with it? That comes from greed, too. Small property-owners are always greedy, Makar's told me that more than once. And another chuckle-headed feller tries to get round me and says Grandad Shchukar ought to be accepted for the Party, then the collective farm will start doing grand. . . . No, you needn't laugh. Some of you must have a screw loose somewhere to make all that cacklin'. Can I read? O' course, I can! I can read anythin' you like and sign my name quite easy, too. Do I approve of the Party rules? I do, I approve of 'em very much! Do I agree with its programme? I do, and I've got nothin' at all agin it. And from socialism to communism I'll be goin' at a gallop as far as my old man's abilities will let me, not too fast, o'

course, so as not to get out o' breath. And I would have been doin' fine in the Party by now and I reckon I'd have had a brief-case under my arm already, but, dear citizens and dear old women, I says this, as before God, I'm not yet worthy to be in our Party. . . . And why not, I ask you? Because o' this here religion that's got a hold o' me, curse it three times over! No sooner do I hear a noise up on high somewhere, a sharp clap of thunder or somethin', than I'm a whisperin': 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!' and off I go and make the sign of the cross and pray to Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and all the saints I can think of at the moment, and I pray to 'em all one after the other, and even go half-way down on my knees because o' that horrible thunder. . . ."

Carried away by his own narrative, Grandad Shchukar was about to make the sign of the cross at that very moment and had even lifted his hand to his forehead to do so, but changed his mind in time and, allowing his fingers to scratch aimlessly at his forehead, began to chuckle in embarrassment.

"Yes, how shall I put it now. . . . When fear is a starin' me in the face I gets all kinds of ideas. The devil knows what Elijah the prophet will be up to next, I think. Suppose, just for the fun of it, he picks up one of those lightnin' bolts of his and bangs it down on my bald pate, then it'd be all up with Shchukar and he could put his hooves away on the shelf. But that won't do for me! I want to plod my way on to communism, I want to get to the cushy life. So sometimes, when the need forces me, I go and pray and give the priest a coin or two, not more than two kopeks just to keep God from getting angry too often, just to be on the safe side, you know. But the devil knows whether it's any use. . . . You may think like a fool that this priest will go and pray for your health, but if you get down to brass tacks,

that there priest has got about as much feeling for you as a dead man has for a woman on the spree, or to put it in learned language for a bauble, which is the same thing. That perishin' priest is out to get himself drunk on your money and not pray to God for you.... So that's the long and short of it. How can I with this bloomin' religion of mine go joinin' the Party? And go distortin' the dear thing and myself and the programme? No, thank you, don't lead me into no such sin! Because it's no good to me, I'm tellin' you that categorical!"

"Grandad, you're side-tracking again!" Razmyotnov shouted. "Get back on the road and stop wandering around in the ditch!"

In reply Shchukar merely raised a warning hand:

"I'm just about to finish, Andrei my boy. But don't you put me off with your silly shoutin', or I may not be able to finish anywhere at all. You sit quiet and listen to my words of wisdom, and try to remember 'em because they'll come in useful to you in later life. I never get off the point, that never happens to me, but you and Makar take turns at boom'n' at me, like a deacon in a choir, and so I can't help willy-nilly gettin' off the train o' my thought. And so what I'm sayin' is that whether I'm in the Party or not I'll still get to communism, and not like this weepin' Willie Kondrat here but with a dance and a joke, because I'm a pure proletarian, and not a small property-owner, and I'm tellin' you that straight! And a proletarian, as I've read somewhere, ain't got nothin' to lose but his chains. O' course, I ain't got no chains, 'cept the old chain we had for fastenin' the dog—that was when I used to live rich—but I've got an old woman, and that, my lads, is worse than any chains or convicts' fetters.... And I'm not expectin' to lose my old woman either—let her live with me, what do I care—but if she goes a gettin' in my way and stoppin'

me from followin' the straight path to communism, I'll slip past her so quick she won't have time to gasp even! You can be quite sure o' that! I'm a terrible darin' fellow when I'm roused, and no one had better get in my way! Either I'll trample him to death or I'll charge past so quick he won't even have time to blink!"

"Grandad, stop! Your time's up!" Nagulnov announced firmly, tapping on the table.

"I'm just finishin', Makar old chap! Don't bang your hand so hard, you may hurt yourself. So that's what I'm sayin'. If you're all in favour of Kondrat, well, what do I care? I'm not agin him either, take him into our Party. He's a respectful hard-workin' lad, I've always said so. And if you really get down to brass tacks and judge things correct like, then there's no doubt about it, Kondrat must be accepted for our Party. And I'm statin' that categorical. To put it in a nutshell, Kondrat is fully worthy o' bein' a Party member. And that's all I have to say!"

"Started by burying a man and ended up wishing him good health, eh?" Razmyotnov commented.

But in the general laughter his words passed unnoticed.

Vastly satisfied with his performance, Grandad Shchukar sat down wearily on a bench, mopped his perspiring pate with his sleeve, and asked Antip Grach who was sitting next to him: "That was fine bit o' criticism, eh?"

"You'd better become an actor, grandad," Antip advised him in a whisper.

Shchukar shot a sidelong glance at his neighbour but failed to notice the smile lurking in his pitch-black beard.

"Why should I be a goin' in for that?" he asked.

"You'll be raking in the cash, raking it in in shovelfuls! It's the cushiest job you've ever seen! All you've got to do is make people laugh with a few funny stories,

blather and boast as hard as you can, and that's all there is to it. Easy money and you won't even get your hands dirty."

Grandad Shchukar perked up quite noticeably and started fidgeting about on the bench and smiling.

"Antip, my dear boy! Just you remember that Shchukar's a winner! If he says somethin', you can be sure it's always to the point, right in the bull's eye, he's not the kind of fellow to shoot wide o' the mark! Well, after all, why not? If the worst comes to the worst, when old age finally gets hold o' me, I reckon I could become an actor. I've been a rare one for that kind o' thing ever since I was a boy, and nowadays I'm proper gone on it! I could do it with my eyes shut."

The old man munched his toothless gums and lapsed into a thoughtful silence, then he asked

"You haven't heard by any chance how they pay you for this here bein' an actor? Is it piece-work or what? What's the wages per man? Them shovelfuls you talk about might be all kopeks, you know. And that wouldn't suit me, though some old skinflints count a kopek as money."

"They pay you according to the figure you cut, with a bonus for swagger," Antip whispered darkly. "The more swagger and swank you put into it, the more wages they pay you. They don't do nothing, these actors, except eat and drink and go touring from one town to the next. It's a real easy life, and you're free as a bird."

"Let's go outside and have a smoke, Antip my boy, Shchukar suggested, suddenly losing all interest in the meeting.

They pushed their way out of the crowded class-room, sat down on the sun-warmed earth by the fence and lighted up.

"Have you ever seen any of these here actors, Antip my boy?"

"Any number. When I was on active service in the town of Grodno, I saw plenty."

"Well, what are they like?"

"Just ordinary."

"Do they look well fed?"

"Fat as hogs."

Shchukar sighed.

"So they do all right for grub winter and summer, eh?"

"Couldn't do better."

"And where do you have to go to join up with 'em?"

"Rostov, I reckon—you wouldn't find any nearer."

"That's not so far away. . . . Why didn't you tell me about this here easy job before? I might have got taken on long ago. You know I'm a terrible good hand at any easy job, actin' and such like, but I can't go in for this heavy farmin' because of my rupture. You've done me out of a nice little livin', you numbskull, you!" Shchukar cried in great annoyance.

"But we've never talked about it before," Antip argued.

"You ought to have put me in the way of this long ago and I might have been enjoyin' myself as an actor by now. And whenever I came home to see the old woman, bang!—there'd be a bottle o' vodka on the table for you for your good advice. So I'd have all the grub I want and you'd have all the booze, wouldn't that be fine! Ah, Antip!. . . We've done ourselves out of a good thing! I must have a word with the old woman this evening and next winter maybe I'll go off to earn a bit. Davidov won't mind and the extra cash will come in useful at home. I'll get myself a cow, about a dozen sheep, and a pig, and then things will start lookin' up a bit. . . ." Grandad Shchukar plunged recklessly into the world of dreams and, encouraged by Antip's silence, went on: "I must say I'm fed up with them stallions, you know, and

winter drivin's not the thing for me. I'm gettin' soft these days, can't stand the frost; my health's not what it used to be. An hour's sittin' in a sledge and my guts get stuck together with the cold. It's quite easy to get a twisted bowel if the frost takes a hold of you there, or an attack on your nervous seat, like what our poor dead Khariton had. And I'm not hankerin' after that. I've got a lot o' things ahead of me and I mean to reach communism if I have to tear myself in half to do it."

But Antip had grown tired of amusing himself with the childishly credulous old man and decided to put an end to the joke.

"You'd better have a good hard think, grandad, afore you sign up as an actor."

"There's nothin' to think about," Grandad Shchukar proclaimed confidently. "If there's any free cash going there, I'll be there this winter collectin' it. Do you call that difficult—cheerin' up a few good folk and tellin' 'em a tale or two!"

"There's some money that just ain't worth takin'. . . ."

"How do you mean?" Shchukar asked guardedly.

"These actors get beaten up."

"Beaten up? Who by?"

"The people that pay money for their tickets."

"But what do they beat 'em up for?"

"Well, if an actor says the wrong thing, or these people don't find him to their liking, or they get fed up with the sound of his voice, they beat him up."

"You mean they beat him up real serious, or just jokin' like, to frighten him?"

"Joking be damned! Sometimes they beat an actor up so bad the poor fellow has to be taken straight from the theatre to hospital, or even to the graveyard sometimes. In the old days I saw it happen with my own eyes. An actor got his ear bitten off and his hindleg twisted back

to front. And he had to go home like that, the poor chap. . . ."

"Wait a mo'. What do you mean—his hindleg? Do you mean to say he'd got four legs?"

"They've got all kinds there. . . . They keep 'em for show. But I made a mistake. I meant to say, his left foreleg, his left leg anyhow. It got twisted round the other way so he was facing back to front and you couldn't figure out which way he was going. And what a hullabaloo he made, the poor devil! You could hear him all over the town! Snorting away like a steam engine he was, made my hair stand on end!"

Shchukar directed a long and searching glance at Antip's face, which, presumably from these unpleasant reminiscences, had grown somewhat grave, and at length decided to believe the truth of what had been said.

"But what was the police a doin', rot their guts!" he asked indignant'y. "How could they just stand by watch-in' such a thing?"

"The police joined in the beating-up. I saw a policeman myself with a whistle in his left hand whistling away, while he lammed into that actor with his right."

"That might have happened under the tsar, Antip my boy, but under Soviet rule the militia aren't allowed to fight."

"The militia don't touch ordinary citizens, of course, but they beat up actors because they're allowed to. It's been like that from time immemorial. There's nothing you can do about it."

Grandad Shchukar screwed up one eye suspiciously.

"You're kiddin', Antip, you devil's son! I just can't believe you somehow. . . . How could you know that actors get beaten up even nowadays? You haven't been to town for thirty years, you never put your nose outside the village, how can you know all this?"

"I've got a nephew living in Novocherkassk, he tells me all about town life in his letters," Antip assured him.

"A nephew, he might know. . . ." Shchukar hesitated again, then gave a deep sigh and his face clouded. "So there's a catch, Antip my boy. . . . It seems it's a risky business being an actor. . . . Well, if the people there get killin' each other, it's certainly no place for me. To hell and hades with a cushy life like that!"

"I thought I'd warn you just in case. You'd better talk it over with your old woman, and then see about getting a job."

"The old woman's got nothin' to do with it," Grandad Shchukar replied drily. "She won't get the kicks if anythin' goes wrong. Why should I take her advice?"

"Make up your own mind then." Antip rose and crushed out his cigarette with his heel.

"I'm in no hurry. It's a long time till winter. And anyway as a matter of fact I'd be sorry to give up the stallions, and the old woman would get lonely all by herself. . . . No, Antip my boy, I reckon these actors had better do without me. Darn all that easy money! And anyway it's not so easy when you come to think of it. If there's goin' to be people pitchin' into you every day with anythin' they can lay hands on, and instead of protectin' you, the militia's goin' to try its fists on you—no, thank you very kindly! Eat those dumplings yourself! I've always been bullied ever since I was a little 'un! Geese and bulls, and dogs, and I don't know what else, they've all had a go at me. And now I've even had a kid palmed off on me. Do you think that's a very nice thing? But to get myself killed as an actor in my old age or have some bodily part of me twisted the wrong way round—no, thank you very kindly! Not for me! Let's go back to the meetin', Antip my boy, it's safe and cheerful there, and the actors can look after themselves. They're a tough lot o' young devils, I reckon.

All this beatin' up they go through only makes 'em fatter. But I'm gettin' on in years. Maybe the grub is good there, but if I had a couple o' good lambastings I'd give up the ghost. What the devil's the use of that nice little livin' to me? These fools who beat up poor actors would tear me to bits for it. No. I don't want to be an actor and don't you go temptin' me any more, you black-bearded devil, and don't get me finally and conclusively upset! After what you've just told me about this mad fool who bit off that actor's ear and the way they twisted his leg round and beat him up, I've got a pain in my ear and a crick in my leg and all my bones are achin' as if I'd been beaten up myself and had my ears bitten and beer dragged around all over the place. . . . I'm terrible sensitive to these horror stories, I am, like a man what's had shell-shock. So you'd better go back to the meetin' alone, for God's sake, and I'll sit here for a bit and have a rest and get my nerves in order, then I'll come in and raise a dejection agin Dubtsov. But just now I don't feel like speakin', Antip my boy. I can feel little shivers runnin' up and down my spine and my knees are kind o' tremblin', kind o' knocking together, damn it, and I can't stand firm on my feet. . . ."

Shchukar began to roll a fresh cigarette. And his hands were indeed trembling so much that the big shreds of home-grown tobacco sprinkled out of the folded strip of newspaper, and his face crumpled tearfully. Antip looked at the old man with feigned sympathy: "I never knew you were such a sensitive soul, grandad, or I wouldn't have told you about the sad life actors lead. . . . No, granfer, acting's not for you! You just sit over your stove and don't aim at big money. And anyway it wouldn't do for you to leave your old woman for long, you've got to think of her age. . . ."

"Yes, she'll be proper grateful, I reckon, when she hears I refused to go and become an actor because of her! There'll be no end of her thanks and gratitude!"

And Grandad Shchukar smiled sentimentally and shook his head as he thought with relish of the pleasure he would receive himself and afford his old wife when he told her the glad news. But a storm was already hovering over him and about to break. . . .

The old man did not know that his true friend, Makar Nagulnov, had half an hour ago sent one of the village lads with a stern summons to Shchukar's wife that she should report at once to the school and on any pretext take the old man home.

"Your old woman sure knows when folk are talking about her," Antip Grach observed, now smiling openly, and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

Grandad Shchukar raised his head. The blissful smile vanished from his face, as if wiped off by a wet sponge. Grim and determined, bristling with domineering severity, the old woman was coming straight towards him!

"Curse her," Grandad Shchukar whispered distractedly. "Where did she pop up from, the perishin' creature? Only a moment ago she was lyin' down so ill she couldn't lift her head, and now here she is. And what by all the plagues brings her here?"

"Home you go, grandad," the old woman commanded in a voice that brooked no refusal.

Sitting on the ground, Grandad Shchukar looked up at her in fascination, like a rabbit at a snake.

"The meeting's not over yet, my dear, and I've got to speak. It's an earnest request from the heads of the village," he at last managed to say very quietly and ended with a hiccough.

"They'll manage without you. Come on! There's work to be done at home."

The old woman was nearly a head taller than her hus-

band and twice his weight. She seized the old man's arm masterfully and hoisted him to his feet with a jerk. Grandad Shchukar came to himself and stamped his foot wrathfully: "Well, I'm not goin'! You haven't got no right to deprive me of speech! This ain't the old regime!"

Without another word the old woman turned round and marched off towards the house with long strides while Grandad Shchukar tottered along at her side making occasional feeble attempts at resistance. His whole appearance silently bespoke a blind obedience to the will of fate.

Antip Grach watched him, laughing soundlessly. But as he mounted the steps of the school porch he suddenly thought to himself: God forbid, but if the old fellow dies, the village will be a dull place without him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As soon as Grandad Shchukar left the school the character of the meeting changed altogether. The speeches of the collective farmers discussing Dubtsov's candidature were business-like and not interrupted by sudden explosions of laughter, and when to everyone's surprise Ippolit Shaly the smith got up and began to speak, something very much like the stillness that presages a storm descended on the meeting.

All the applications for Party membership had been discussed from all points of view; all three candidates had been unanimously accepted by public vote as members of the Party with a six-month period of probation, when Shaly asked to be allowed to speak. He rose from a bench by the window and leaning his broad back on the window-frame, said: "I want to put one small question to our store manager Yakov Lukich."

"Two if you like," Makar Nagulnov responded with cheerful alacrity.

Yakov Lukich Ostrovnov turned reluctantly towards Shaly. His face was set and tensely expectant.

"Here we have people joining the Party. They don't want just to live with it, they want to live in it and share its grief and joy," Shaly said in a deep husky voice, fixing his protrudent black eyes on Ostrovnov. "So why don't you apply to join the Party, Yakov Lukich? I want to ask you straight. Why are you hanging back? Or don't it matter a rap to you that the Party's straining like a fish under ice to break through to a better life for us? But you, what are you doing? You're after a quiet life in the cool, with no one to make it hot for you; you're waiting for other folk to bring home the goods and hand 'em to you on a plate, is that it? But what kind of figure are you cutting? You're cutting a very interesting and instructive figure for the people... It's very instructive to everybody in the village, if you want to know!"

"I earn my own living and I've never yet asked anything of you," Ostrovnov replied sharply.

But Shaly pushed out his left hand masterfully as if to thrust aside this pointless argument, and said: "There's different ways of earning a living. You can put a sack over your shoulder and go a begging and you won't starve. But that's not what I'm talking about. And don't wriggle like a snake under a fork, Yakov Lukich—you know what I mean! In the old private days you used to be a glutton for work, you'd snap up any job like a wolf if it'd bring you in an extra kopek. But right now you're taking your work easy, as if you was only doing it as a blind. . . . But that's not the point either—the time hasn't come for you to answer to the world for your shirking and your shady life. That time will come

and you'll have to answer! But right now, just you tell us why you don't put in for the Party?"

"I haven't got the learning to be a member of the Party," Ostrovnov replied quietly, so quietly that no one in the school save those sitting next to him heard what he said.

From the back someone bawled imperatively: "Speak up! We can't hear what you're mumbling about! Say it again!"

For a long time Ostrovnov made no reply, as though he had not even heard the request. In the expectant silence that had fallen the frogs could be heard croaking in steady chorus by the dark and sleepy stream, while somewhere far away, probably on the old windmill beyond the village, a screech-owl cried mournfully and the night birds sang in the green acacia bushes under the windows.

To prolong the silence would have been embarrassing and Ostrovnov repeated much louder: "I haven't got the learning to be a member of the Party."

"So you're learned enough to be store manager, but not to be in the Party, eh?" Shaly persisted.

"One's farming, the other's politics. If you can't see the difference between the two, I can." Ostrovnov's voice was loud and clear, now that he had recovered from his surprise.

But Shaly was not to be put off. He gave a dry little laugh: "Our Communists here have to deal with farming *and* politics, and—believe it or not!—they make a go of it! One don't interfere with the other, it seems. You're up to some dodge, Lukich, you don't speak out. . . . You want to get round the truth, that's why you're dodging!"

"I'm not dodging anything, there's nothing to dodge," Ostrovnov responded huskily.

"Yes, you are! There's something going on in the back of your mind, and that's why you don't want to join the

Party. But maybe I'm making a mistake? If so, you'd better correct me!"

The meeting had already lasted four hours. In spite of the evening chill, the school was unbearably stuffy. A few table lamps glimmered dully in the corridors and class-rooms and seemed to make it even stuffier. And yet the sweating crowd sat motionless, silently and tensely following the verbal duel that had suddenly flared up between the old smith and Ostrovnov, sensing that behind all this there lurked something unspoken, something dark and sinister.

"What might be going on in the back of my mind? If you can see through everything so easy, you'd better say what it is," Ostrovnov proposed, regaining the composure he had almost lost and switching from defence to attack.

"Speak for yourself, Yakov Lukich. Why should I speak for you?"

"I've got nothing to say to you!"

"Don't say it to me, say it to the people. . . speak to the people!"

"No one's asking me anything except you."

"My question's as much as you can answer. So you don't want to talk? Never mind, we'll wait. If you don't talk tonight, you'll talk tomorrow."

"What are you on at me about, Ippolit? Why don't you join the Party yourself? Speak for yourself instead of fishing for confessions from me—you're not a priest!"

"Who told you I don't want to join the Party?" Shaly asked slowly, without changing his position, laying deliberate emphasis on each word.

"You haven't joined, so it must mean you don't want to."

At this Shaly gave a grunt and levered himself away from the window with his shoulder. The villagers readily made way for him and with rolling unhurried strides he

walked up to the platform table, saying as he went: "I didn't join before, it's true, but I'm joining now. If you won't join, Yakov Lukich, it means I've got to. But if you'd been putting in just now, I'd have stood down. We couldn't live together in one Party, you and me! We're men of different parties. . . ."

Ostrovnov made no reply and merely smiled vaguely and Shaly walked up to the table, met Davidov's shining grateful glance and, holding out an application scratched on a tiny scrap of paper yellow with age, said: "I haven't got anyone to recommend me. We'll have to get over that somehow. . . . Which of you lads will give me a recommendation? Write it out, one of you!"

But Davidov was already writing the recommendation in a hurried scrawl. Then Nagulnov took the pen from him.

Ippolit Shaly was unanimously accepted as a member of the Party. After the voting, the Communists of the Greynyachy Party group rose from their seats to applaud him and the whole meeting joined in, clapping slowly, clumsily, with heavy resounding slaps of their calloused, toil-hardened palms.

Shaly stood blinking with emotion. There was a new expression in his brimming eyes as he looked round at the familiar faces of his fellow villagers. But when Razmyotnov whispered in his ear: "Uncle Ippolit, what about saying something real nice to the people," the old man shook his head.

"No point in wasting words. And anyway I haven't got a pouchful of them kind o' words. . . . See how they're clapping? I reckon they know what's what without my telling 'em."

But the man whose appearance had undergone the greatest change in these few minutes was not one of the newly accepted Party members but the secretary of the Party group himself, Makar Nagulnov. Davidov had

never seen him like this before. Makar was smiling openly and broadly. Standing erect at the table, he was rather nervously adjusting his tunic, aimlessly fingering the buckle of his army belt, shifting from one foot to the other and, above all—smiling, exposing two whole rows of small front teeth. His lips, always firmly compressed, had quivered at the corners and suddenly broken into a childish touching smile. And this was such an unusual expression on Makar's ascetically severe face that Ustin Rykalin was the first to exclaim in the greatest astonishment: "Look at our Makar—he's smiling! What a sight for sore eyes, eh!"

Nagulnov made no attempt to hide his smile.

"So someone's noticed it!" he retorted. "Why shouldn't I smile? I'm smiling because I'm glad. Who says I mustn't? Dear citizens, people of our village, I consider our open Party meeting closed. The agenda's exhausted."

Even more erect than ever, his square shoulders even squarer, he stepped out from behind the table and said in a voice that had a new ring: "As secretary of the group, I should like to see the dear comrades who have been accepted for our great Communist Party. I want to congratulate you on this great honour!" And then compressing his lips and becoming his usual self once again, he uttered a quiet but imperative: "This way!"

Kondrat Maidannikov came up to him first. Those sitting at the back noticed that his shirt was soaked in perspiration and clung to his back from waist to shoulders. "You'd think he'd mown half a field, the poor soul!" one of the old women lisped toothlessly, and someone said with a quiet chuckle: "Kondrat's been through it this evening!"

Bowing his head, Nagulnov took Kondrat's outstretched hand between his long palms, which were moist with excitement, squeezed it with all his strength and

said solemnly, with a slight quiver in his voice: "Comrade! Brother! Well done! All of us, Communists, hope—we all hope you'll be a fine Bolshevik. And so you shall!"

And when Ippolit Shaly came forward last of all with his bear-like tread and, chuckling quietly in his embarrassment at finding himself the centre of attention, held out his huge black, work-scarred hand before he was anywhere near the table, Nagulnov strode to meet him and firmly embraced the old smith's broad stooped shoulders.

"Well, Uncle Ippolit, this is grand! My heartiest congratulations! And all our other Communists congratulate you. Live long and don't get rich, and use that hammer of yours about another hundred years for the good of Soviet power and our collective farm! Live long, old man—that's what I say to you. The longer you live the pleasanter it'll be for everyone concerned—and that's the truth!"

The four new Party members bunched together in an embarrassed little group and awkwardly exchanged handshakes with the other Communists. The rest of the people crowded to the door talking animatedly among themselves, but Davidov shouted: "Citizens, just a minute! Let me say a few words!"

"Go on, chairman, but make it short because we're just about stifled in here! It's like a bath-house!" someone warned him laughingly from the crowd.

The collective farmers began to sit down again, returning to their former seats. For a few minutes there was a restrained hum of voices, then came a hush.

"Men and women of the collective farm, specially the women! Today as never before, we've got every member of the farm together," Davidov began, but he was interrupted by Dyomka Ushakov, who shouted from the corridor:

"You're starting like Grandad Shchukar, Davidov! He's always saying 'Dear citizens and old women' and you're about the same. You both start on the same note."

"They learn from each other, him and Shchukar. Davidov's got hold of Davidov's word 'fact', and Davidov will soon be saying, 'Dear citizens and sweet old women'." Grandad Obnizov put in.

At this there was such a good-natured but thunderous burst of laughter that the lamp flames flickered wildly and one of the lamps went out altogether. Davidov laughed, too, covering his gap-toothed mouth with his broad hand, as he always did. Only Nagulnov shouted indignantly: "What's going on? There's no seriousness at this meeting! What have you done with it? Have you sweated it all out of yourselves?"

But his shout was fuel to the flames and the laughter flared up again and swept through all the class-rooms and down the corridor with renewed force. Makar made a hopeless gesture and turned away to the window with an air of indifference.

But the way his prominent jaw muscles rippled in his cheeks, and the twitching of his left eyebrow showed that it was not easy for him to maintain his assumed aloofness.

The next moment, however, when all was quiet, he jumped up from his chair as if he had been stung by a wasp, for from somewhere at the back of the room had come the loud and grating voice of Grandad Shchukar.

"Now I ask you, dear citizens and old women—why do I address you like that?"

Before the old man could complete his sentence the laughter thundered like a gunshot and put out two more lamps. In the semi-darkness someone accidentally broke a lamp glass and swore violently, a woman's voice exclaimed disapprovingly: "Now, then, behave yourself! Do

you think you can swear like that just because it's dark. you fool!"

The laughter gradually died away and Grandad Shchukar's grating and indignant voice was again heard through the gloom:

"One fool starts swearin' away in the dark for all he's worth, and the others laugh for no reason at all. . . . Life's a funny business nowadays! It's enough to stop a man goin' to meetings altogether! Now I'm a goin' to explain away to you why I says: 'Dear citizens and old women!' It's because old women are safe and reliable. Take any old woman, she's just like the State Bank—no monkey business about her. I don't expect no dirty tricks from them in my old age. But as for the young women and the girls, I can't bear the sight o' them! And why, I ask you? Because it wasn't some respectable old woman what palmed off her kid on me—that's not old woman's business, that ain't. And even the liveliest old woman ain't got enough spunk in her to bring a child into the world! But some young hussy has been a hand-in' out presents at my expense and had the cheek to swing one on me in the form of bein' a father. That's why I just can't stand these here young petticoats and don't even want to wink at one after what they've done to me. It gives me a proper hang-over to look at some handsome young filly. That's what they've brought me to, the wretches. . . . So what do you expect me to call 'em after such a thing? 'My dear virtuous young women and girls'? Do you expect me to hand 'em out nice compliments like that? Not for the world!"

His patience exhausted, Nagulnov raised his brows very high and exclaimed in astonishment: "Where did you spring from, grandad? Your old woman took you home an hour ago—how did you manage to turn up here again?"

"Took me home, did she? So what?" Shchukar replied haughtily. "What's that got to do with you? That's our private affair, it's not a Party matter. Is that clear?"

"No, it isn't. If she took you home she had a reason for it, and you ought to be at home now."

"I was at home, but I'm not any more, Makar my boy! And no one's goin' to order me about, not you, nor my old woman. To the devil with you, let me alone for the Lord's sake!"

"How did you manage to slip away, grandad?" Davidov asked, scarcely able to restrain his laughter.

Of late he was finding it quite impossible to maintain a fitting air of seriousness in Shchukar's presence, he could not so much as glance at him without a smile. And now he waited for the old man's reply, puckering his eyes and already covering his mouth with his hand. No wonder that when they were alone together Nagulnov would say with undisguised irritation: "What's the matter with you, Semyon? You're getting giggly as a girl that's being tickled, you're not like a man any more!"

Encouraged by Davidov's question, Shchukar elbowed his way furiously down the centre of the crowded classroom towards the presidium table.

"Grandad, what are you doing?" Nagulnov shouted. "Walking on people's heads? Speak from where you are, we'll let you. But keep it short!"

Checking his progress half-way, Grandad Shchukar bawled vehemently in reply: "You tell your grandmother where she can speak from—I know my place! You're always babblin' a lot o' rubbish from the platform, Makar, so why should I have to talk to people from the back o' beyond? I can't see a single face from there—just a lot of heads and backs and what good folk use for sittin' on. Who do you think I can talk to from there? Heads and backs and all the rest of it? You come

to the back here and start makin' your speeches, if you like, but I want to look people in the eye when I'm speakin' to 'em! Is that clear? Well, shut up for a bit then and don't put me off my stroke. You've got into the habit of interruptin' me beforehand. I don't get a chance to open my mouth before you start bawlin' your remarks at me. No, my lad, that's not the way for us to go on!"

When he reached the table, Shchukar glared at Makar with his one sound eye and asked: "Did you ever in your life, Makar my boy, see a woman interrupt a man at his business for any really urgent reason? Answer me honestly!"

"I dare say it has happened in a case of fire or disaster. But don't hold up the meeting, old chap, let Davidov have his say and after the meeting you and I will go to my place and talk till daybreak if you like."

Nagulnov, the unbending Nagulnov, was evidently making a concession to Grandad Shchukar just to please him and stop him from holding up the meeting any longer. But he achieved an unexpected effect—Grandad Shchukar gave a little sob, wiped his tear-filled eyes on his sleeve and with genuine emotion in his voice said: "It's all the same to me whether I spend the night with you or with the horses. But I just can't show up at home tonight because there'll be such a battle royal with my old woman a waitin' for me there that I may kick the bucket on my own doorstep! It'd be only too easy!"

Grandad Shchukar turned a face wrinkled as a baked apple towards Davidov and suddenly went on in a firmer tone:

"You was askin', Semyon, my dear boy, how I got away from bein' at home. Do you think it's easy? Just let me explain to the meetin' in a word or two—it won't take a minute—about the terrible old woman o' mine. I've got to have some sympathy from the people. And

if I don't get that sympathy—then, Shchukar, you'd better lie down on the damp ground and peg out altogether, and the Lord be with you! That's the kind o' fix this life o' misery has landed me in!... You see, an hour ago, my heart's desire, she comes along and I'm a sittin' outside in the yard with Antip Grach havin' a smoke and chattin' about actors and the life we leads. And along she comes, the cursed witch, takes me by the arm and drags me away after her like a prize stallion draggin' a harrow upside down. Didn't turn a hair, didn't even grunt or gasp from the strain, though I was diggin' both my heels in for all I was worth.

"If you want to know, my old woman could be used for ploughin' or haulin' carts, and it was child's play for her to haul me—that strong she is, the witch! Terrible strong she is, like a cart-horse, honest to God, I'm not lying! If anyone knows just how much strength she's got, it's me. I've felt it on my own hide. . . .

"And there she was a draggin' me along after her, and what could I do? Strength is strength. So I went runnin' after her and asks: 'What makes you come and take me away from a meetin', like a new-born babe from its mother's breast? I've got work to do there!' And she says: 'Come along, old man, one of our shutters has broken off its hinges, you've got to fix it properly or the wind may blow tonight and smash our window.' What do you think o' that? There's a fine thing for you. 'Won't there be another day tomorrow to fix a shutter?' I says. 'You must have gone out o' your mind, you old cabbage-stump!' And she says: 'I'm ill and I'm fed up with bein' ill all by myself, and it won't hurt you to sit at home with me for a bit.' And that's another fine thing, I thinks. So I says to her: 'Ask some old woman to come and sit with you while I goes back to the meetin' and raises a dejection agin Agafon Dubtsov.' And she says: 'I want to have you around and I don't want no old

woman.' And there's the three scurvy answers I got out of her!

"What was I supposed to do, put up voluntary with such floutin' o' human dignity or was I to evackeeate myself straight away from this here impassable bog o' stupidity. And that's what I did, I evackeeated myself voluntary. As soon as we got inside the house I slipped out again into the porch, and then out on to the steps and put the catch on the door double-quick, and then I came a runnin' back to the school! The windows in our cottage are very small and narrow and my old womah, as you know, is very big and thick. So she couldn't get out o' one o' them windows to save her life, she'd get stuck like a fattened pig in a broken fence. That's been tested that has, because she's been stuck like that more than once before. And so now she's sittin' at home, the dear old thing, like the devils in the old days before the Revolution used to sit in the wash-basin, and she can't get out o' the house! If anyone feels like it, let him go and set her free. But I can't show myself in front of her on no account. I'm a goin' to make myself somebody's temporary lodger for a couple o' days till my old woman has cooled off a bit, till her wrath agin me has died down. I'm not so silly as to go riskin' my life and I've got no use for these here battles of hers. She might cut my life short in a hasty moment, then what would happen? Then the prosecutor would just write me off and leave it at that! No, thank you very much, eat them pancakes yourself! A clever man can understand all this here without no explanations, and no matter how much you tell a fool, he'll just go on livin' like a fool till he's in his coffin!"

"Have you finished, grandad?" Razmyotnov asked calmly.

"I can't help finishin' it. I'm too late to raise a dejection agin Agafon—you've let him into our Party any-

way. And maybe it's all to the good, and maybe I even agrees with you. I've explained everythin' about the old woman and I can see in your eyes that all of you as are sittin' here are feelin' mighty sorry for me. So what more do I want! I've talked to you to my heart's content, I couldn't keep talkin' to my stallions all the time, could I now? You people here have got just a bit more understandin' than them anyhow. . . ."

"Sit down, old man, or you'll be starting again," Nagulnov commanded.

Contrary to the expectations of all present Shchukar went back silently to his place without any of his usual objections. But there was such extraordinary complacency in his smile, and his one sound eye gleamed with such triumph that it should have been manifestly clear to all that he was doing so not as the vanquished but as the vanquisher. There were friendly smiles for him as he went. The Gremyachy people had after all very warm feelings for the old man.

Only Agafon Dubtsov could not resist the chance of spoiling the old fellow's happy mood. As Shchukar, full of his own importance, went past him, Agafon put a terrible expression on his pock-marked face and whispered ominously: "Well, you've done it this time, old chap. . . . Let's say good-bye!"

Shchukar came to a sudden halt, stood munching his lips for a while, and finally summoned enough strength to ask in a trembling voice: "How . . . how do you mean, Agafon—we ought to say good-bye?"

"What I mean is you've got very little time left to live, just about enough to take one breath and look round yourself. You'll be in your coffin before you know it!"

"But why, Agafon, old chap?"

"There's no mystery about it. They're going to murder you."

"Who is?" Grandad Shchukar scarcely managed to croak.

"Why—Kondrat Maidannikov and his wife. He's already sent her home to fetch the chopper."

Shchukar's legs began to tremble and he sank down weakly on the bench beside Dubtsov, who obligingly made room for him.

"But what made you decide to take my life?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Because of the dejection I raised agin him?"

"That's it! They always kill you for criticism, sometimes with a chopper, sometimes with a sawn-off rifle. Which do you like best—to be killed by a bullet or a chopper?"

"Which do I like? That's a nice way o' puttin' it! Who'd like an event like this?!" Grandad Shchukar burst out indignantly. "The thing you'd better tell me is what I'm goin' to do now. How can I defend myself from this crazy fool?"

"You'd better tell the authorities about it while you're still alive."

"Sounds as if you're right," Grandad Shchukar agreed after some meditation. "I'll go straight to Makar and complain. But this cussed Kondrat, ain't he afraid o' penal servitude for killin' me?"

"Well, he says, they won't give me more than a year for Shchukar, or maybe two at the most, and I can put up with that. . . . They don't give you much for little old codgers like him. Hardly anything for such chicken feed, in fact."

"He'll eat his words, the son-of-a-bitch! He'll get a full ten years, I know that!" Grandad Shchukar yelled furiously.

Whereupon he received a strict warning from Nagulnov

"If you yell like a half-killed goat again, old man, we shall turn you out of the meeting at once!"

"Sit quiet, grandad. I'll take you home from here, I won't let you come to no harm!" Dubtsov promised in a whisper.

But not a word did Shchukar speak in reply. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his head bowed low. He was thinking of something with desperate concentration, his brow wrinkled painfully. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and pushed his way to the presidium table almost at a run. Dubtsov saw him bend over Nagulnov and whisper something in his ear, pointing first at Dubtsov himself, then at Maidannikov.

It was hard, almost impossible, in fact, to make Nagulnov laugh, but now even he gave way and with a smile at the corners of his lips looked reproachfully at Dubtsov and shook his head. "Sit here and don't fidget, or you'll fidget yourself into trouble," he said pulling Shchukar down beside him.

A little later the triumphant and reassured Grandad Shchukar caught Maidannikov's eye and cocked a snook at him from under his left elbow. The astonished Kondrat lifted his eyebrows and Shchukar, feeling quite safe under Makar's protection, promptly cocked double snooks at him.

"What's the old fellow cocking snooks at you for?" Antip Grach, who was sitting next to Maidannikov, asked.

"Darned if I know what he's up to," Kondrat replied irritably. "It seems to me he's getting a bit touched these days. But I suppose it's time. He's no chicken and he's been through a lot in his day, the poor fellow. We've always got on all right together before, but now it looks as if he's found a grudge against me. I'll have to ask him what it is."

By chance Kondrat happened to glance at the row

where Grandad Shchukar had been sitting. He laughed quietly and nudged Antip with his elbow.

"He was sitting next to Agafon. Now I know what's up! That devil Agafon's been whispering something in his ear about me, he must have invented some rubbish that got the old man's rag out, but I couldn't say for the life of me what I've done to upset him. He's getting just like a little child these days, he believes anyone."

Standing at the table, Davidov waited patiently for the slow-moving villagers to find their places and settle down.

"Come on, Davidov! Don't keep us waiting!" the impatient Dyomka Ushakov shouted.

Davidov whispered something to Razmyotnov and hurriedly began: "I won't keep you long, that's a fact! The reason I specially mention the women of our farm is because the question I have to put to you mainly concerns them. The whole collective farm is present at the meeting today and we, Communists, have thought the matter over and want to make you this proposal. At the factories for a long time now there have been children's kindergartens and nurseries, where every day from morning till night little children are fed and looked after by experienced nurses and teachers, that's a fact, comrades! And meanwhile the mothers go to work and don't have to worry their hearts out about the children. Their hands are free, and they are free of looking after their kiddies. Why shouldn't we fix up a kindergarten like that at our farm? There are two kulak houses going empty; there's milk, bread, meat and millet and a few other things besides in our store, that's a fact! We can supply our little citizens with all the grub they need, and with all the looking after, too. Then what's stopping us, damn it? Right now the grain harvest is just round the corner and the way you women are turning out for work at present is not much good.

in fact it's no good at all, I'm telling you that straight, and you know it yourselves. Well, dear women collective farmers, do you agree to our suggestion? Let's take a vote, and if the majority are in agreement, we'll make the decision now, so as not to have to call another meeting to deal with the matter. Who's in favour—hands up, please."

"Who'd be against such a providence?" Turilin's wife, who had a large family, shouted. And looking round at her neighbours, she raised a slim-wristed arm.

A dense forest of arms shot up over the heads of the men and women sitting and standing in the crowded room. No one voted against. Davidov rubbed his hands and grinned with satisfaction.

"The proposal to organise a kindergarten is passed unanimously! It's very nice, dear comrades citizens, to see such unanimity. We've hit the mark this time, that's a fact. Tomorrow we'll get down to business. Come to the management office, mothers, to register your children tomorrow morning, about six, as soon as you've finished with your cooking. Talk it over amongst yourselves, women, and choose a cook, a good one who knows how to keep things clean, and pick two or three other women from among you to take the job of nurses—the neat and tidy kind, who're fond of kiddies. We'll ask for a manageress at the district centre because we want her to be able to read and write and keep accounts. We've been into the matter and we've worked it out that we'll credit the cook and each of the nurses with a workday unit for every day's work. And we'll pay the manageress a fixed wage at the state rate. It won't ruin us, that's a fact! There's no need to grudge money in a case like this because the expense will pay for itself by the number of women turning out for work. The time will come when I'll prove that to you for a

fact! We accept all kiddies from two to seven. Any questions?"

"Won't a workday unit a day be rather a lot? It's not very hard work looking after kids, it's not like carting at harvest," Yefim Krivosheyev, who had been one of the last men in the village to join the farm, expressed his doubts aloud.

But this brought upon him such a storm of indignant exclamations from the women that the deafened Yefim puckered his face and waved his arms as if to beat off a swarm of bees. This was only at first, however. Sensing danger, he jumped on to a bench and bawled cheerfully: "Keep off, my dears! Keep off, for Christ's sake! It slipped out by accident! My stupid tongue made a fool of me! Let me out of here, please, and don't brandish your fists so near my face! Comrade Davidov, give a new member of the farm a hand! Don't let him die a hero's death! You know what our women are like!"

The women had raised a tremendous clamour:

"You old rascal, have you ever looked after children?"

"Make a cook of him, the fat hog!"

"Better a nurse!"

"If he knew what it was he wouldn't take it on for two workday units! And he wants to do us down, the old screw!"

"Give him a lesson, girls, so he'll know how to keep a rein on that tongue of his!"

The whole thing might have ended without further ado but Yefim's joking shout seemed to serve as a signal for tension to break loose and matters took an altogether unexpected turn. With squeals and laughter the women dragged him off the bench, a dark-brown hand clutched his chestnut beard, and there was a loud ripping sound as his new sateen shirt split at every seam. Nagulnov shouted in vain to call the women to

order. The scrimmage continued and after a minute or two Yefim, purple with laughter and embarrassment, was hustled out into the corridor. Both sleeves of his shirt were left lying on the class-room floor; the shirt itself, now buttonless, hung on him in shreds, ripped in several places from collar to tail.

Panting with laughter, Yefim stood among the guffawing crowd of Cossacks saying: "The strength they've got, the hussies! This is the first time I've said a thing against them and look what a mess I've made of it." He drew his torn shirt together bashfully over his brown belly and said in dismay: "How am I going to show myself to the wife in a bit o' lace like this? She'll kick me out of the house for such waste. I'll have to join up with Grandad Shchukar and become a temporary lodger with some widow or other—there's nothing else for it!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The meeting broke up long after midnight. People walked home slowly down the main street and side streets talking animatedly; gates squeaked in every yard, the clack of door latches was loud in the stillness; here and there laughter was heard and, unaccustomed to the presence of so many people at this hour, the awakened village dogs raised a frenzied barking all over Gremyachy Log.

Davidov was one of the last to leave the school. After the suffocating stuffiness that had filled every class-room the street air seemed cold and intoxicatingly fresh. It was almost as if his greedy nostrils could catch the smell of heaven in the light breeze.

Two figures were walking ahead of him. Davidov smiled involuntarily as he recognised their voices.

Grandad Shchukar was saying heatedly: "And I was foolish enough to believe him, the burblin' devil, when he said Kondrat wanted to murder me for my criticism and self-criticism. What a scare he gave me. This is a hell of a business, I thought to myself—Kondrat with a chopper in his hands. He seems to be a quiet chap but how the devil can you tell. . . . He might take a swing at me in his temper and crack my head in two like a water-melon! . . . I don't know why I pay any attention to that cussed Dubtsov! He can't take a step without tryin' to do me a bad turn! All his life he's been a waggin' his tongue like a rag on a fence. It was him, the villain, as taught Trofim the goat to come buttin' me with his horns anywhere he pleased, no matter that I'm a ruptured man. That I know in detail! I saw him, myself, teachin' the animal that horrible trick, only then I never thought he was teachin' it agin me, learnin' it to shorten my life."

"Don't believe him. Don't believe a word he says, always treat him with all possible suspicion! Agafon's terrible fond of getting up to all kinds of tricks. He pulls everyone's leg, it's his nature," Nagulnov's husky bass replied reassuringly.

The two of them entered the gate of Nagulnov's house, continuing a conversation they had evidently begun while still at the meeting. Davidov had an impulse to follow them but changed his mind.

He turned down the next side street and had not gone more than a few paces when he saw Varya Kharlamova leaning against the fence. She stepped towards him.

The waning moon cast only a dim light but Davidov saw the shy, unhappy smile on the girl's lips.

"I've been waiting for you, I know you always go home this way. . . . It's a long time since I saw you, Comrade Davidov."

"Yes, we haven't met for a long while, Varya," he responded gladly. "You've got quite grown-up and beautiful since then, that's a fact! Where've you been all this time?"

"There was the weeding and mowing and so much to do at home. . . . And you never came to see me once, never even thought about me, I expect."

"You are a touchy one! Don't scold me, I'm always busy, never have any time. Shave once a week, eat once a day—that's the harvest for you. But why were you waiting for me? Something to tell me? You seem kind of sad somehow. Or am I wrong?"

He gave the girl's firm plump arm a little squeeze just above the elbow and looked sympathetically into her eyes.

"Is it some trouble you have? Out with it!"

"Are you going home?"

"Where else would I be going at this hour?"

"Anywhere maybe, all doors are open to you. . . . If you're going home, we're going the same way. Perhaps you'll take me as far as my gate?"

"Will I? You're a queer customer, you are! Have you ever heard of a sailor, even an ex-sailor, turning down an offer like that from a pretty girl?" Davidov replied jauntily taking the girl's arm. "Come on then—in step! Left, right! Left right! Now what's this terrible trouble of yours? Get it off your chest! The chairman must know everything, that's a fact! Everything, inside out!"

And all of a sudden he felt Varya's arm tremble under his fingers; her step faltered, and she gave a quick sob.

"Well, you are in a bad way, Varya! What's the matter?" he asked quietly and anxiously, dropping his jocular tone. He stopped again, trying to look into her eyes.

Varya's tear-stained face pressed against his broad

chest. Davidov stood very still, now frowning, now raising his sun-bleached eyebrows in surprise. Through her stifled sobs he managed to catch:

"They want to marry me off . . . to Vanka Obnizov. . . . Mum keeps nagging me day and night. Marry him, she says—they live fine." And suddenly all the bitter grief that had evidently been pent up in her heart for many a day broke loose in a cry of suffering: "Dear God, what am I to do?"

For an instant her hand rested on Davidov's shoulder, then slid down and hung limply at her side.

Certainly Davidov had never thought or expected that such news could plunge him into utter confusion! Dismayed, numb with surprise, his heart pricking painfully, he gripped Varya's hands and, taking a step back, looked into her tearful downcast face, not knowing what to say. And only now did it dawn on him that for a long time perhaps, without acknowledging it even to himself, he had loved this girl with a love that for a man like him with all his experience of life was strangely fresh and pure, and that now he stood almost face to face with the two sad friends and companions of nearly all true love—parting and loss.

He took a grip on himself and asked in a voice that was slightly hoarse: "And you? What about you, my little doe?"

"I don't want to marry him! I just don't!"

Varya lifted her brimming eyes to Davidov. Her swollen lips were quivering pitifully. And as if in answer, Davidov's heart shuddered. His mouth had grown raw and parched. With an effort he swallowed his prickly spittle and said:

"Then don't marry him, that's a fact! No one can force you."

"But can't you see, mother's got six of us and the others are all younger than me, and mother's ailing,

and I shall never be able to feed such a flock even if I kill myself with work! Can't you understand that, my dearest?"

"And if you marry, then what? Will your husband help?"

"He'd give his last shirt to help us! He'd work day and night! Do you know how much he loves me? He's crazy about me, that he is. Only I don't need his love or his help! I don't love him one little bit! I can't bear him! When he holds me with his sweaty hands, I feel sick. I'd rather. . . . But what's the use of talking! If only father was alive, I wouldn't think of it. I might even have gone to secondary school. . . ."

Davidov was still gazing steadily at the girl's tearful face, now so pale in the light of the moon. Lines of grief had appeared at the corners of her lips, her eyes were downcast, the lids a dark blue. She, too, was silent, crumpling a handkerchief in her hands.

"Suppose we gave your family some help?" Davidov asked hesitantly after brief reflection.

But before he could finish, Varya's eyes had dried and were gleaming with anger instead of tears. Her nostrils quivering, she exclaimed in a low husky voice that was mannishly rough: "Go to hell with your help! Understand?!"

And again there was a brief silence. Then Davidov, a little dazed with the unexpectedness of it all, asked: "But why?"

"Because I say so!"

"But why?"

"I don't need your help!"

"It's not my help. The collective farm will help your mother because she's a widow with a big family. See? I'll tell the board about her and we'll take a decision. Now can you see straight, Varya?"

"I don't need any help from the collective farm!"

Davidov shrugged with annoyance.

"You're a queer case, you are, that's a fact! First she needs help and is ready to get hitched to the first likely lad she meets, then she doesn't need any help at all. . . . I just can't understand you! One of us has a screw loose tonight, that's a fact! What do you want then?"

His calm, reasoning voice—or perhaps it only seemed so to Varya—reduced the girl to utter despair. She burst into sobs, covered her face with her hands and, turning sharply away from Davidov, walked down the street, then broke into a run, leaning forward, her wet hands still pressed to her face.

Davidov caught up with her at the turning, seized her shoulders and said angrily: "Look here, Varya, don't play about! I'm asking you seriously. What's the matter?"

At this Varya gave full rein to her frenzied girlish despair and bitter grief: "You blind fool! Oh, how blind you are! You can't see anything! I love you, I've been in love with you ever since spring. And you . . . you go about as if you'd got both eyes shut. All my friends are laughing at me, and everybody else too, probably! Are you blind? All the tears I've shed over you, you beggar. All the nights I couldn't sleep a wink. And still you can't see anything! How can I take help from you or charity from the collective farm, if I love you? And you, you devil, how can you open your mouth to say such a thing! Why, I'd rather starve than take anything from you! There—now I've told you everything! Are you satisfied! Is that what you were waiting for? And now leave me and go to your Lushkas! I don't need you, I don't need a cold lump of stone, a blind heartless devil like you!"

She tried to tear herself out of Davidov's arms but he held her tight. He held her very firm and tight, but said nothing. For a few minutes they stood in silence,

then Varya wiped her eyes with the corner of her kerchief and said in a flat voice that seemed just ordinary and tired: "Let me go."

"Don't talk so loud, someone will hear," he said.

"I'm talking quiet as it is."

"You take no care. . . ."

"I've been careful all spring and summer, I've had enough of being careful. Oh, let me go! It'll soon be getting light and I've got to milk the cow. Do you hear?"

Davidov lowered his head and said nothing. He still had his right arm firmly round the girl's soft shoulders, he could feel the warmth of her young body and was breathing in the heady scent of her hair. But it was a strange sensation that he now experienced. He felt no emotion, no fever in the blood, no desire; only a gentle sadness wrapped his heart as though in mist, and for some reason he found it hard to breathe.

Shaking off his numbness, he touched the girl's round chin with his left hand, lifted her head a little and smiled.

"Thank you, dear! My dear Varya!"

"What for?" she whispered barely audibly.

"For the happiness you're giving me, for scolding me, for calling me blind. . . . But don't think I'm really blind! I've sometimes thought, often thought, in fact, that my happiness, my own personal happiness had got left astern, left behind in the past, that is. . . . Though I had precious little of it even in the past."

"I've had even less," Varya said quietly. And, a little more audibly now, she asked: "Kiss me, chairman, for the first and last time, and let's part because the dawn is coming. I don't want anyone to see us, I'd be ashamed."

She offered her lips, standing childishly on tiptoe and throwing back her head. But he kissed her coolly on the

forehead as if she were a child and said firmly: "Don't be sad, Varya, it'll all turn out right. I won't take you home any further, I'd better not, and that's a fact. We'll see each other tomorrow. You've set me a tough problem to solve. . . . But I'll solve it by morning, it's a fact I will! And tell your mother not to go anywhere tomorrow evening because I'll come to see her at sunset. We'll have a talk. And mind you're at home, too. Good-bye, my little doe! Don't be disappointed. . . . I've got to think what to do about you and about myself, too, haven't I! Isn't that right?"

He did not wait for a reply, but turned away silently, and in silence set off home at his usual steady pace.

And so they might have parted, neither lovers nor strangers. But Varya called after him very quietly. Davidov stopped reluctantly and asked in a low voice: "What is it?"

He watched the girl coming quickly towards him, not without a faint stir of anxiety. What new decision could she have reached in the few minutes of their parting? Grief might drive her to anything.

Varya came at him headlong and pressed herself against him, breathing in his face and whispering ardently:

"My darling, don't come to see us, don't say anything to mother! If you want to, I'll live with you like—like Lushka! We can live together for a year, then you can leave me! I'll go and marry Vanka. He'll take me whatever I'm like, even after you! He said so the day before yesterday. 'You'll always be dear to me whatever happens!' Do you want that?"

Without stopping to think he pushed her roughly away and said contemptuously: "You fool! You little fool! You slut! Do you realise what you're saying? Are you crazy? Have some sense and go home—sleep it off.

Do you hear! I'll be round this evening, and don't try to hide! I'll find you anywhere!"

Had she turned away in offended silence, they would have parted thus. Instead she asked in a small bewildered voice: "But what shall I do, Semyon, my darling?"

And once more his heart contracted, and this time it was not with pity. He put his arms round her and ran his fingers several times over her bowed head.

"I'm sorry, I just got angry. . . . But you're a fine one, too! Ready to throw yourself away like that. . . . You must go now, sweet. Go and have a sleep and we'll see each other this evening. All right?"

"All right," she answered meekly. And then she broke away from him in fright: "Heavens! It's getting light! I shall be in trouble. . . ."

The dawn had crept up stealthily and now, as though he had just awoken, Davidov noticed the distinct outlines of houses, barns, roofs and solid dark-blue clumps of trees in the silent orchards, and in the east—the faint muddy-purple strip of the dawn.

There was more than mere chance behind Davidov's unintentional remark to Varya that his happiness had been "left astern". Had he ever known any real happiness in this topsy-turvy life of his? Probably not.

Till late in the morning he sat in his room at the open window, smoking one cigarette after another and recalling his past love affairs. And now, on inspection, it turned out that there had been nothing that he could recall with gratitude or sadness or even, if it came to that, with pangs of conscience. Just brief encounters with chance women involving no obligation whatsoever, and that was all. They had met simply and parted simply, without strain, without distressing words, and met again perhaps a week later as strangers, who ex-

changed cold smiles and a few meaningless words merely for the sake of appearances. Rabbit love! Poor Davidov felt ashamed even at the memory of it, and as he voyaged mentally through his past experience of love and struck upon these episodes he would frown disgustedly and try to pass over something that adorned his life as much as, shall we say, a deep grease stain adorns a clean sailor's uniform. To forget these unpleasant moments as quickly as possible, he would hastily light another cigarette, thinking to himself, so this is where trying to sum things up gets you—just a lot of muck and rubbish, that's a fact! You're on your beam ends, sailor. You've behaved yourself fine with women—no worse than any dog.

By eight o'clock he had made up his mind. Well, I'm going to marry Varya. It's time you packed up this bachelor life, sailor! And it should be all to the good. I'll get her into an agricultural school and in a couple of years we'll have our own agronomist on the farm. And then we'll start pulling together. The rest will come later.

He was not the man to hesitate and put matters off once he had taken a decision. He washed himself and went straight to the Kharlamovs.

He found Varya's mother in the yard and greeted her respectfully. "Good morning, mother! How's life?"

"Hullo, chairman! We're not getting on too bad. And what would you be wanting? What brings you here this morning?"

"Is Varya at home?"

"She's asleep. You stay up at these meetings all night."

"Let's go inside. And wake her up. I want to talk to you."

"Come in, then. You're welcome."

They entered the kitchen. Eyeing Davidov guardedly Varya's mother said: "Sit down, I'll go and wake up Varya."

Presently Varya appeared. She looked as if she had not slept that morning. Her eyes were puffy with tears, but her face was youthfully fresh and seemed to be illuminated with an inner warmth of affection. She looked at Davidov from under slightly lowered brows, searchingly and expectantly.

"Hullo, Comrade Davidov! So you've come to see us, at last. You're a welcome guest."

Davidov sat down on a bench, casting a quick glance at the children sleeping huddled together on their wretched bed.

"I'm not a guest," he said. "I'm here for a purpose. Now listen, mother—" And for a minute he paused in search of words, looking at the elderly woman with weary eyes.

She was standing by the stove, her fingers at her sunken breast toying with the folds of her shabby frock.

"Look here, mother," Davidov repeated. "Varya loves me and I love her, too. The decision's this: I take her off to the district centre to study to be an agronomist, there's a school for that there. In two years she'll qualify and come back to work in Gremyachy. And this autumn, when we've got the harvest in, we'll hold the wedding. Before I came on the scene you had an offer from the Obnizovs. But don't force the girl, she's got to choose her own way in life, that's a fact!"

The woman's face grew sterner and she turned to her daughter.

"Varya?!"

"Mother!" was all Varya could whisper as she rushed to her mother's side and bending over her with happy tears began to kiss her wrinkled toil-worn hands.

Davidov turned away to the window and her whisper reached him through her sobs: "Mother darling! I'd go to the end of the world with him! I'd do anything he says. Work or learning—anything! Only don't make me marry Vanka Obnizov! I couldn't bear it."

After a brief silence Davidov heard the trembling voice of Varya's mother: "It seems you've decided it all without your mother's consent? Well, may God be your judge. I've nothing against Varya being happy, but don't you shame my girl, sailor! She's all I have. You can see she's the eldest in the house, she's mistress and master here. And what with grief and the children and being so poor—you see what I've come to. I'm an old woman before my time! I saw you, sailors, during the war, I know what you're like.... But don't you ruin our family!"

Davidov rounded on the woman and looked her straight in the eye: "Leave the sailors alone, mum! Someone'll write one day about the way we fought and smashed your Cossack lads, that's a fact! And as for our honour and love, we can be a damn sight more honourable and true than a lot of rotten civvies! You needn't worry about Varya, I'll do her no harm. And about the way we're going to live, there's one thing I want to ask you. If you agree to us pairing up, I'll take her off tomorrow to Millerovo, get her fixed up at school, and for the time being, till the wedding, I'll move in here with you. I'll feel better here than with strangers. And anyway I've got to keep your family and help you, haven't I? Without Varya you'll knock yourself up trying to look after the children! So I'm taking the job of looking after you all on my own shoulders. They're broad enough, that's a fact! Then everything'll be fine. Well, is it settled?"

Davidov strode forward and embraced her withered shoulders. And when he felt her lips, wet with tears,

kissing his cheek, he said in annoyance: "You women are too mighty fond of tears! You could soften a heart of stone the way you carry on. Well, old lady, shall we make a go of it? It's a fact we shall!"

Davidov pulled out of his pocket a carelessly crumpled wad of notes, hastily pushed them under the shabby table-cloth and, smiling awkwardly, muttered: "That's what I saved when I was working at the factory. I only need a bit now and then for baccy.... Drinking's not in my line and you'll need some cash to get Varya ready for the road and buy the kiddies something. Well, that's that. I'm off. I've got to be at the district centre today. I'll be back this evening and bring my case over. You get yourself ready, Varya. Tomorrow morning at dawn we start for Millerovo. Well, good-bye, my dears." Varya sprang towards him and Davidov took both women in his arms, then turned away to the door.

His tread was firm and sure, the same as it had always been, the light, rolling gait of the sailor, but if anyone who knew him had seen the way he walked at that moment, they would have noticed something new in it.

The same day Davidov took a trip to the district centre and got Nesterenko's permission to visit the Party regional committee.

"Don't hang about there," Nesterenko warned him.

"I won't stay there an hour longer than necessary. But ring up the regional secretary so he'll see me and help me to get Kharlamova into an agricultural school."

Nesterenko wrinkled his eyes slyly. "You wouldn't be leading me up the garden, sailor? Remember, you'll only have yourself to blame if you let me down and don't marry this girl. We won't let you off a second time

if you play the Don Juan! It was easier with Lushka Nagulnova. After all, she was divorced. But this would be a different case altogether! . . .”

Davidov looked fiercely at Nesterenko and broke in without letting him finish.

“You’ve got a rotten opinion of me, secretary, that’s a fact! I’ve talked to her mother and made my proposal according to the rules! What more do you want? Why don’t you trust me?”

Nesterenko asked quietly: “One last question, Semyon. Have you lived with this girl yet? And if so, why don’t you want to register your marriage with her before she leaves the village? You’re not expecting anyone from Leningrad—a former wife, say? Can’t you see, you great oaf, that I’m worried about you as a brother. It would be a terrible disappointment to me to lose faith in you as a decent man. . . . I’m butting into your private affairs not just out of idle curiosity. Don’t get your back up, do you hear? And here’s the very last thing. You don’t want to get Kharlamova into this school just to untie your hands, do you? To free yourself of her presence? . . . You won’t get away with that, my lad!”

Davidov’s legs were stiff from the fast ride and he bent them wearily as he sank heavily on to an old chair that stood exactly opposite the arm-chair in which Nesterenko was sitting. He stared dully at the battered wicker-work arms of the shabby little arm-chair and listened to the incessant twittering of the sparrows in the acacia bushes. Then he looked at Nesterenko’s yellow face, at his old tunic with its neatly darned sleeves and said:

“I made a mistake when I swore my friendship to you back in the spring. Because it seems you’ve got out of the habit of trusting anyone. Damn it all, secretary! I reckon the only man you trust is yourself, and

you only do that on your day off. But as for everybody else, even the ones you make friends with, you keep them under some daft suspicion. . . . How can you run a district Party organisation when you're like that? Make sure of yourself first, then start suspecting others!"

Nesterenko's face twisted in a painful grin.

"So you've got your back up. I asked you not to."

"Yes, I have!"

"Then you're a poor fish."

Davidov rose even more wearily than he had sat down.

"I'd better go or we'll be having a row. . . ."

"I'd rather we didn't," said Nesterenko.

"So would I."

"Well, stay another five or ten minutes and we'll sort this out."

"All right." Davidov sat down again and said: "I've done that girl no harm, and that's a fact! She's got to study. She's got a big family and she's the eldest, she's got the whole house on her back. . . . Get me?"

"I get you," Nesterenko replied but continued to regard Davidov with a cold estranged look in his eyes.

"I intend marrying her when she's settled down at the school and I've finished with the autumn work. So it'll be a peasant wedding, after the harvest," Davidov concluded dully. But seeing that Nesterenko's face had softened a little, and that he seemed to be listening with greater attention, he went on more willingly, without his previous sense of embarrassment and inhibition. "I've never been married in Leningrad or anywhere else—I'm taking my first risk with Varya. And it's high time—I'll be forty soon."

"Do you count ten for every year after thirty?" Nesterenko asked with a smile.

"What about the Civil War? I'd count ten for every year in that."

"A bit too much."

"Look at yourself and you'll say I'm just about right."

Nesterenko rose from behind his desk, walked across the room, rubbing his hands as if to warm them, and said uncertainly: "That's as may be. . . . Anyhow we weren't talking about that, Semyon. I'm glad I've found out you're not going to trip up this time like you did with Lushka Nagulnova. This time you look as if you've got something a bit sounder. I think you've made a good start and I wish you luck!"

"Will you come to the wedding in the autumn?" Davidov asked with fresh warmth in his heart.

"I'll be the first guest!" said Nesterenko and again his smile recovered its former mischievous twinkle and a sly gleam appeared in his dull eyes. "Not first in order of precedence, but because I'll be the first there. As soon as I hear the date."

"Well, so long then! Give the regional secretary a tinkle."

"I'll do it today. Don't be too long there."

"Back in a flash!"

They shook hands firmly.

Davidov walked out into the dusty sun-warmed street. He's not himself these days, he thought, he's very ill! That yellow face and hollow cheeks, and eyes like a corpse. . . . Perhaps that's why he talked to me like that?

Davidov was about to mount his horse when Nesterenko put his head out of the window and called him over.

"Just a minute, Semyon!"

Davidov turned back reluctantly and mounted the steps of the porch.

Nesterenko had grown even more hunched and his whole body seemed to have wilted. He looked at Davidov and said: "Maybe I was a bit sharp with you, but

you mustn't mind. I'm in bad trouble. On top of my malaria I've got a dose of TB and it's playing hell with me in its worst form. Cavities on both lungs. Tomorrow I'll be going to a sanatorium, the regional committee's sending me. I didn't want to leave the district before the harvest but I can't help it. It's not just a pleasure trip. But I'll try to be back for your wedding. Do you think I'm making too much fuss? No, it's just that I wanted to share my trouble with a friend. It's so unexpected. . . ."

Davidov walked round the desk, embraced Nesterenko firmly and silently, kissed him on his hot perspiring cheek, and only then said: "Go and have some treatment, old chap! Only the youngsters die of that disease. We old 'uns are immune!"

"Thanks," Nesterenko said very quietly and turned away quickly to the window.

Davidov strode out into the street, untethered his horse, jumped into the saddle and did something he had never done before—lashed his horse to a gallop from a standing start. As he rode hard down the street of the little town, he ground out furiously through clenched teeth: "Don't go to sleep, you long-eared devil!"

When he arrived back in the village after dinner, Davidov rode straight to the Kharlamovs' house, dismounted at the gate and entered the yard without undue haste. Evidently he had been seen from the house, for when he stumped up to the porch bow-legged and frowning because he was sore from the long ride, his future mother-in-law came out to meet him. Her manner was quite different and friendly, as if she had got used to him already.

"You must have worn yourself out, my dear? How did you manage to get back so quick? It's not a short ride to the stanitsa and back," she exclaimed with feigned

sympathy as she watched Davidov's unsteady bow-legged progress across the yard, inwardly, no doubt, rather amused to see her future son-in-law swinging his whip so stylishly though he could scarcely walk. She, an old Cossack woman, knew well enough how these "Russian" horsemen sat their mounts.

Knowing the worth of such sympathy and inwardly cursing it, Davidov retorted rather roughly: "That'll do, mum! Where's Varya?"

"She's gone to look for a dressmaker. The girl's got to make something to wear out of her old things, hasn't she? Well, my lad, you've picked a fine bride for yourself! All she's got to her name is an old skirt! Where were your eyes?"

"I didn't ask you for a skirt this morning, I asked for your daughter," Davidov said licking his parched lips. "Is there any cold water to drink? Skirts can be bought—we can let that wait a while. When will she be back?"

"Who knows? Come inside. Have you settled with your chief about putting Varya to study?"

"Of course, I have. We're going off to the regional centre tomorrow, so get your daughter ready for a long journey. Well? Going to turn the tap on again? You're late!"

The mother did, in fact, burst into tears and wept bitterly and inconsolably, but presently, when she had overcome her weakness, she wiped her eyes with a not very clean apron and said in tearful annoyance: "Go into the house, do, may the dear Lord save you! Are we to talk of such things in the yard?"

Davidov went into the cottage, sat down on a bench and pushed his whip under it.

"What is there to talk about, mother? Everything's clear and settled. Now let's do this. I've tired myself out in the past few days. You give me some water to drink, then I'll take forty winks, and when I wake up we'll

have a talk. And one of the kids can put the horse away in the stable."

The woman's face softened.

"Don't worry about the horse," she said. "The children will see to it. Wait a moment and I'll bring you some cold milk. I'll bring it to you now from the cellar."

Fatigue and sleepless nights had worn Davidov out and he never got his milk. By the time the old woman appeared carrying the cold damp jar from the cellar Davidov had fallen asleep on the bench where he sat, his right arm hanging limp, his mouth slightly open. The woman made no attempt to wake him. She lifted his lolling head gently and slipped a small blue pillow under it.

Bemused by the stuffy warmth of the cottage and his own weariness, Davidov slept soundly for about two hours. He was awakened by the whispering of children and the light touch of girlish hands. He opened his eyes and saw Varya sitting beside him smiling, and around him—a crowd of five children, all the offspring of the Kharlamov family.

The smallest of them, evidently the boldest, took Davidov's big hand trustingly in his small fingers and asked timidly: "Uncle Semyon, is it true you're going to live with us?"

Davidov slid his legs off the bench and smiled sleepily at the little boy.

"Yes, sonny, it's true. Of course, I am. Varya's going away to study, so who will feed and clothe you? It'll be my job now, that's a fact!" And he placed a fatherly hand on the child's tousled head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Long before dawn on the following day Davidov awakened Grandad Shchukar in the hayloft where he had been sleeping, helped him to harness up the stallions and

drove up to the Kharlamovs' gate. Through the half-closed shutters he saw a lamp burning in the kitchen.

Varya's mother was cooking, the children were asleep, packed together crosswise on the broad wooden bed, and Varya, already dressed for the journey, was sitting on a bench in her own home as if she no longer belonged here and were no more than a passing guest.

She greeted Davidov with a happy and grateful smile.

"I've been ready a long time. I'm waiting for you, my chairman."

"She started getting herself ready at the first cock," her mother added, when she had greeted Davidov. "Yes, she's as green as they make them! And as foolish, too—that goes without saying. Now breakfast will be ready in just a minute. Sit down, Comrade Davidov."

The three of them hurriedly ate the cabbage soup of the day before and some fried potatoes, and washed it all down with milk. Davidov thanked the mistress of the house and rose from table. "It's time we were off. Say good-bye to your mother, Varya, but don't be long about it. And there's nothing to get watery about, you're not parting for ever. Next time I go to the regional centre, mum, I'll take you with me to see your daughter. . . . Now I'm going out to the horses." From the doorstep he asked Varya: "Are you taking any warm clothes with you?"

Varya replied not without some embarrassment: "I've got an old padded jacket. It's ever so old, tho'."

"Never mind that. You're not going to a ball in it, that's a fact."

An hour later they were far away from the village. Davidov was sitting next to Shchukar, with Varya on the other side. Now and then she would take Davidov's hand, give it a little squeeze and withdraw again into her own thoughts. The girl had never in her short life been outside her village for any length of time. She had been

to the stanitsa only once or twice, and had never seen a railway. And so this, her first journey to town made her young heart beat with exultation, confusion and fright. She could not help feeling sad at leaving her family and friends and she was on the verge of tears.

When they had crossed the Don by the ferry and the horses began to plod up the hill on the far side of the river, Davidov jumped off the cart and walked along at Varya's side, brushing the heavy dew from the roadside wormwood, which was still colourless and without the sparkle it acquires at high morning when the sun has risen and it glistens with all the colours of the rainbow. From time to time he would look up at Varya, smile encouragingly and say: "Now then, Varya, keep your eyes in a dry place."

Or: "You're a big girl now, grown-ups mustn't cry, my dear."

And the tearful Varya would obediently wipe her wet cheeks with the corner of her blue kerchief and move her lips soundlessly, offering him a timid and submissive smile in reply. Mists still jostled round the chalky hump-backed foothills that rose on this side of the Don, and the high ridge was covered with them.

At this early hour neither the roadside weeds nor the drooping stalks of yellow clover, nor yet the corn that swept down from the hill almost to the verge of the road exhaled their usual day-time scents. Even the all-powerful wormwood had lost its fragrance. All smells had been quenched by the dew, which hung as abundantly on corn and grass as if a beady July shower had just passed. And so it was that at this quiet hour of dawn the steppe was dominated by two very ordinary smells—that of the dew, and of the road dust it quelled.

Grandad Shchukar in an old tarpaulin raincoat belted with an even older red cloth sash was sitting hunched up and chilly and had been unusually silent for some

time. except when he occasionally waved his whip and whistled reedily to urge the horses to an even faster pace than they were already making.

But when the sun rose, he perked up and asked: "There's a rumour goin' round the village, Semyon my boy, that you're thinkin' o' marryin' Varya. That so?"

"It is, grandad."

"Well, marriage is one o' them things that sooner or later you can't get out of no matter what you do—the menfolk, I mean," the old man declared sententiously. "I, too, was married off by my late parents when I was only eighteen years of age. But even in those days I was terrible sharp-witted. I knowed just what a devil's brew this here marriage business is. . . . And I reckon I tried harder than anyone in the whole wide world to get out of it! I knowed that bein' married was no bed o' roses, not by a long chalk. And the things I did to myself, Semyon my boy! I pretended I was off my head and ill and havin' fits. Well, for goin' mad, my father—a very strict man he was—laid about me for two hours with a whip and didn't give up till the whip handle broke on my back. For havin' fits he gave it me with a pair of reins. And when I pretended to be ill, and started groanin' with pain and sayin' I was all rotten inside, he went out into the yard without another word and brought in the shaft from the sledge. The old devil even took the trouble to go to the shed and mess up the sledge to get it. That was the kind o' man he was, may his soul rest in heaven. He brings in this here shaft and says to me very tender like: 'Get up, my lad, I'm a goin' to treat you. . . .' Oho, I thinks, if he's taken the trouble to get that shaft, he'll take the trouble to knock the life out o' me with this treatment of his. A shaft in his hands was a pretty nasty thing, I can tell you. He'd got a screw loose somewhere, had the old man. I'd noticed it even when I was a little 'un. . . . And so I sprang out o'

bed as if someone had splashed boilin' water over me. And got married. What could I do agin him, the silly old fool? And my life's been goin' agin the grain ever since, all inside out and upside down it's been. Nowadays my old woman weighs a good couple o' hundredweight, but in those days..." The old man munched his lips thoughtfully, lifted his eyes to the sky and concluded firmly: "Not less than three and a half, honest to God she did!"

Choking with laughter, Davidov asked barely audibly: "Isn't that a bit too much?"

To which Grandad Shchukar replied glibly: "What's it matter to you? Half a hundredweight more, half a hundredweight less—what's the difference? You aren't the one as has had to put up with all the sufferin' and battles. I'm the one that's had to do that! I've had such a rotten time in married life I'd have hung myself for two pins, that I would. But she picked the wrong man for that! I'm a desperate man when I'm roused. So in my desperation I thinks to myself, no, my dear, you go and hang yourself first and I'll follow you..."

Grandad Shchukar shook his head gaily, gave a little chuckle, evidently indulging in all kinds of memories, and when he saw that he was being listened to with unflagging attention, willingly continued his tale.

"Ah, dear citizens and—and you, Varya! Our love was fast and furious in our young days, mine and the old 'woman's, that it was! And why was it, I ask. Because all our lives it was based on anger and anger and fury is one and the same thing, as I happened to read in Mark's big dictionary.

"And when I happened to wake up at night, my old woman would be either cryin' or laughin', and I'd think to myself, that's right, my dear, have a good cry, women's tears are the dew of heaven. I don't live no life of honey with you, but I don't cry about it.

"And this is what happened in the fifth year of our wedded life. Our neighbour Polikarp came home from active service. He was servin' in the Ataman's regiment, a guardsman he was. They'd taught the fool to twirl his moustache there, and so when he comes home he starts a twirlin' it around my old woman. I happened to come along one evenin', and what do I see but them a standin' there, my old woman one side o' the fence, and him the other. So I walked past into the house, pretendin' to be blind, as if I hadn't seen 'em. But the next evenin' there they were again. Aha, I thinks, this is a bad thing. And the third day I went out on purpose. And when I came back in the twilight—they were a standin' there again. Here's a nice affair! I thinks. I've got to do somethin' about this! And so I thought o' somethin'. I wrapped a three-pound weight in a towel and crept up behind Polikarp in his yard—barefoot I was, so he wouldn't hear me—and while he was a twirlin' his whiskers, I gave him one on the napper as hard as I could. And down he went by the fence, like a log.

"A few days later I met Polikarp. He'd got his head all bandaged up. And he says to me very sour like: 'You might have killed me, you fool!' And I says to him: 'It remains to be seen who's the fool here—the one who was a lyin' around by the fence or the one who was standin' up.'

"And the cure worked like magic! They stopped standin' at that fence. The only thing was that soon afterwards my woman took to grindin' her teeth at night. I'd wake up from the clashin' and clankin' and ask: 'What's the matter, dear, got the toothache?' And she answers me back: 'Leave me alone, you fool!' So I lies there and I thinks to myself, it remains to be seen who's the bigger fool here—the one who grinds her teeth or the one who sleeps quiet and peaceful like a good baby in its cradle."

Fearing to offend the old man, his listeners kept very quiet. Varya was shaking with silent laughter. Davidov had turned away from Shchukar, covering his face with his hands, and seemed to be suffering from a strangely troublesome and noisy cough. But Shchukar, noticing nothing, went on enthusiastically:

"That's what it's like sometimes, this furious love! To put it in a nutshell, there's not much good to be had out of these here marriages, as I sees it from an old man's point of view. Or take this case, for instance. In the old days we used to have a young schoolmaster livin' here in the village. He had a bride, a merchant's daughter, who was from our village too. And this schoolmaster, he used to go about as smart and handsome—in dress, I mean—as a young cockerel. And most of the time, instead o' walkin', he used to ride around on a bicycle. They had only just come in in those days, and all the folk in the village thought they were a wonder—not to mention the dogs. As soon as our schoolmaster appears in the street with his gleamin' wheels, those cussed dogs would go clean mad. And he'd be in such a hurry to get away from 'em, he'd bend himself double on his machine and pedal away so fast you couldn't see his legs movin'. Ran over a good many o' the little ones, he did, and he ran into a packet of trouble because o' them, too.

"One mornin' I was crossin' the square to go and look for our mare in the steppe and I sees a pack o' dogs comin' towards me. In front there's a bitch, and behind her a whole gang o' dogs—about thirty of 'em, if not more. And in those days our village folk, curse 'em, used to rear so many o' them dogs you couldn't count 'em. In every yard there'd be two or three hounds, and what hounds they were! Anyone of 'em was worse than a wild tiger, and nigh on as big as a calf. The owners were so keen on guardin' their money chests and cellars, you

see. But what was the sense? The war knocked it all out of 'em anyway.... And here was this here dogs' weddin' a comin' towards me. Well, I'm no fool, so I chucked away my bridle and buzzed up a telegraph pole as quick as the most daring cat you've ever seen. Twisted my legs round it, I did, and sat there. And then, as luck would have it, here comes our schoolmaster on his bicycle with his wheels and handle-bars a shinin' bright. Well, o' course, they corners him. He lets go his bike and starts hoppin' about on the spot. So I gives him a shout: 'Come up here, you fool,' I yells, 'or they'll tear you to ribbons in a minute!' He tried to climb up the pole, the poor chap, but he was a bit too late. As soon as he grabbed hold of it, they ripped every bit o' clothin' off him—his new herringbone trousers, his posh tunic with gold buttons on it, and all his underclothes. And some of the fiercest ones even got at his bare flesh.

"Well, they had all the fun they wanted out of him, then off they went. And he was left a clingin' to that pole and the only blessed thing he had left on him was his peaked cap with its cockade, and even that had got its peak broken when he tried to climb up the pole.

"So we climbs down from our retreat—him first, and me afterwards—I'd been sittin' higher, just under the wires. So down we came in the right order, him stark naked and me with only a shirt on and a pair of canvas trousers. So he starts beggin' me: 'Lend me your trousers, grandad, and I'll bring 'em back in half an hour.' And I says to him: 'My dear chap,' I says, 'how can I let you have my trousers if I haven't got anything on underneath? You'll go ridin' away in 'em on your bike and I'll be left dancin' around this 'ere pole without any trousers on in broad daylight. I'll let you have my shirt, but, I'm sorry, not the trousers.' So he put on my shirt with his legs through the sleeves and walked off very slow like. He ought to have been a goin' at a gallop, but how could

he, the poor chap, when he could only walk like a hobbled horse? Well, that merchant's daughter, his bride-to-be, saw him in this get-up. And that very same day their love came to an end. He had to get himself transferred urgent to another school. And a week after that event, what with the disgrace, and havin' been so scared by them dogs, and his girl givin' him the go-by and their love affair goin' to pot like that—the lad got gallopin' consumption and died. But I don't go much by what he's supposed to have died of, I reckon it was the fear and shame mostly. So that's what it brings you to, this perishin' love, not to mention all the weddings and marriages. And you, Semyon, my good chap, ought to be thinkin' a hundred times afore marryin' Varya. They're all tarred with the same brush, you know Makar and me, we can't stand the sight of 'em, and we've got reason for it."

"All right, grandad, I'll think it over again," Davidov reassured the old man and while Shchukar was lighting a cigarette quickly drew Varya towards him and kissed her on the temple, just where a fluffy curl of hair was trembling in the wind.

Wearied by his own story-telling and perhaps by his reminiscences, Grandad Shchukar presently fell into a doze and Davidov took the reins from his limp hands. Overcome by drowsiness, Grandad Shchukar mumbled: "Thank you kindly, my dear boy, just you wave the whip at the horses for a bit while I have forty winks. Drat this old age! As soon as the sun gets a bit warmer I feel all sleepy. . . . And in winter—the colder it is the more you want to sleep, and if you aren't careful you may get frozen to death while you're at it."

He lay back between Varya and Davidov, his small puny body stretched limp as a whiplash along the drozhky, and was soon snoring and whistling in his sleep.

And now the sun-warmed steppe had begun to breathe

all the odours of the different grasses; the smell of warm dust on the road mingled softly with the fragrance of fresh-mown grass, the blue threads of distant horizons emerged faintly from the haze, and with eager eyes Varya surveyed these lands beyond the Don, all so new and unfamiliar to her, yet all part of the one infinitely dear and kindred steppe.

They spent the night under a haystack, having covered more than a hundred kilometres by evening. They made their supper of the modest provisions they had brought from home, and sat together for a while by the drozhky, gazing silently at the starry sky

Davidov said: "We've got to make another early start tomorrow, let's turn in now. You make yourself comfortable on the drozhky, Varya. Take my coat and cover yourself with it. And grandad and I will bed down under the stack."

"That's a correct decision, Semyon," Shchukar responded approvingly, extremely glad that Davidov would be sleeping with him.

To be honest, the old man was rather afraid of spending the night alone in this strange and lonely part of the steppe.

Davidov lay on his back with his hands behind his head, staring up into the pallid indigo sky that yawned above him. He spotted the Great Bear, sighed, and then caught himself smiling for no particular reason.

It grew properly cool only at midnight when the earth had lost its scorching daytime heat. Somewhere not far away, in a ravine, probably, there was a pond or a shallow steppeland lake. And from there came the smell of wet mud and rushes. A quail struck up quite close by. A hesitant croaking of frogs—only a few of them—could be heard. "Sleep, sleep!" a small owl called drowsily in the night.

Davidov fell into a doze, but just then a mouse made a rustle in the hay and Grandad Shchukar jumped up with frenzied agility.

"Hear that, Semyon?" he said, shaking Davidov. "We've picked a fine place, curse it! This here stack must be full o' snakes and serpents. Can't you hear the darn things? And there's some owls screechin' like in a graveyard. Let's get away from this death spot!"

"Go to sleep and stop having ideas," Davidov responded drowsily.

Shchukar lay down again and fidgeted about for a long time, tucking his raincoat round him and muttering: "I told you we ought to go in a wagon. But no, you wanted to cut a dash in a drozhky. Now enjoy yourself. If we'd come in a wagon we could have filled it with our own home-grown hay and jogged along as quiet as you please, and all three of us would have been able to sleep in it, but now we've got to lie and rot under a strange haystack like any homeless dog. It's all right for Varya, she's sleepin' up on top in safety, like a lady, but here there's a rustlin' round your head, a rustlin' round your sides, a rustlin' round your feet, and God knows what all this here rustlin' is about. Just wait, when you drop off to sleep, some snake or other will come crawlin' out and give you one in a private spot—and that'll be the end of your marriage prospects! And you never know, there's some places they can bite, these snakes, and finish you off altogether. Then your Varya would weep a basinful o' tears, wouldn't she? But what good would it do? . . . There's no sense in any snake a bitin' me, I'm old stringy meat, I am, and anyhow I stink o' goat because Trofim often sleeps with me up in the hayloft, and snakes don't like the smell o' goats. So it's clear it's a goin' to bite you and not me. . . . Let's move on somewhere else!"

"Will you ever settle down tonight, grandad?" David-

ov said impatiently. "How can we move on in the middle of the night?"

Grandad Shchukar replied sadly:

"You've brought me to a spot that reeks o' death. If I'd only known, I'd have said good-bye to my old woman beforehand, but I just went off as if I'd never even been married. Are you sure you won't move on, my dear boy?"

"No. Go to sleep, grandad."

Crossing himself and sighing deeply, Grandad Shchukar said: "I'd be only too glad to go to sleep, Semyon, but I'm scared. There's my heart a thumpin' in my chest, and there's that cussed owl screechin' away, may it choke itself...."

And to the steady rhythm of Grandad Shchukar's lamentations Davidov fell fast asleep.

He awoke before sunrise. Varya was sitting beside him leaning against the stack with her legs tucked under her. She was unravelling the tangled strands of hair on his forehead and the touch of her fingers was so light and careful that even when he was fully awake Davidov could scarcely feel them. Her place in the drozhky had been taken by Grandad Shchukar, who lay fast asleep under Davidov's coat.

Pink and fresh as the July morning, Varya whispered: "I've been down to the pond and had a wash already. Wake grandad and let's make a start." She pressed her lips lightly against Davidov's prickly cheek and sprang lithely to her feet. "Will you go and wash, Semyon? I'll show you the way to the pond."

His voice still husky with sleep, Davidov replied: "I've slept too long to wash, Varya. I'll have a rinse somewhere on the road. Did this old suslik wake you up long ago?"

"He didn't wake me. I woke up at dawn myself and he was sitting there beside you with his arms round his

knees, smoking. 'Why aren't you sleeping, grandad?' I said. 'I haven't slept all night, my dear,' he answered. 'This place is full o' snakes. You go and take a walk in the steppe and I'll have a quiet hour in your place.' So I got up and went down to the pond to wash."

They arrived in Millerovo before noon. In half an hour Davidov settled matters at the regional committee and came out cheerful and smiling with satisfaction.

"The secretary decided everything like it should be at a regional committee—smart and business-like. There are some girls from the regional Komsomol who'll take you under their wing, Varya my dear, and now we'll go on to the agricultural school to fix you up at your new place of residence. We've got the assistant director's agreement already. Till the entrance exams begin you'll be coached by the instructors, and by autumn you'll be in fine trim, that's a fact! The girls from the regional committee will look after you—I spoke to them about it on the phone." Davidov rubbed his hands vigorously in his habitual fashion and asked: "Do you know who's being sent to us as secretary of the village Komsomol organisation, Varya? Who do you think? Ivan Naidyonov, the lad who visited us last winter with the propaganda team. He's a bright lad, I'll be pleased to see him. There'll be some real progress in our Komsomol group now, I'm telling you that for a fact!"

In two hours all arrangements had been made at the agricultural school and it was time to part.

Davidov said firmly: "Good-bye, my dear, don't fret. And study well. Don't worry about us."

He kissed her on the lips for the first time and walked away down the corridor. At the door he glanced back and suddenly such a sharp pang of pity gripped his heart that the rough boarded floor seemed to heave under him like a deck. Varya was standing with her forehead pressed against the wall, her hands covering her face; her

blue kerchief had slipped down on to her shoulders and everything about her expressed such helplessness and grief that Davidov could only grunt and make hastily for the yard.

Three days after leaving the village he was back once more in Gremyachy.

Though it was late, Nagulnov and Razmyotnov were waiting for him in the office. Nagulnov greeted him sombrely, and no less sombrely said: "You don't seem to have been at home at all these last few days. First it's the district centre, then it's the regional committee. . . . What took you off to Millerovo?"

"All in good time. What's new in the village?"

Instead of answering, Razmyotnov asked: "Did you see the corn, old chap? How's it getting on, is it ripe yet?"

"The barley can be reaped in places, selective like. So can the rye. In fact, you can probably bring in all the rye at once, but our neighbours seem to be hanging back."

As though to himself Razmyotnov said: "Then we won't hurry either. You can reap rye green if the weather's good—it'll ripen in the shocks. But suppose it rains? Then you're done."

Nagulnov agreed with him.

"We can wait another three days, but then we'll have to start reaping like mad or the district committee will eat you alive, Semyon, with me and Andrei thrown in as titbits. . . . Well, I've got a piece of news, too. Up at the state farm there's an old army pal of mine, I went to see him yesterday. He's been asking me to for a long time now, but I couldn't manage it somehow. Anyway, yesterday I thought I'd spend a day with him, take a look at an old friend and also see how their tractors work. I'd never seen it in my life and I was mighty curious. They were doing their ploughing and I hung around there the

whole day. Well, lads, I must say that Fordson is the real thing! It turns up fallow at a gallop. But as soon as it hits a bit of virgin soil on a corner somewhere its strength fails, the poor thing. It rears like a troublesome horse at a fence. And when it's been up there a minute or two, it brings its wheels down and back it goes as fast as it can on to the fallow. Yes, virgin soil's too tough for it to chew. . . . But it wouldn't do us any harm to have a pair of horses like that on our farm. That's what I keep thinking about. Mighty tempting to have a thing like that on the farm! I was so carried away by it I didn't even have time for a drink with my pal. I came straight back here from the fields."

"Weren't you thinking of calling at the Martynovsky Machine and Tractor Station?" Razmyotnov asked.

"What's the difference between that and a state farm? Tractors are the same everywhere. And it's a longish way to go, with the harvest just round the corner."

Razmyotnov gave a sly wink.

"I must admit I thought worse of you, Makar. I reckoned you'd drop in at Shakhty on the way from Martynovskaya to see Lushka. . . ."

"Didn't even enter my head," Makar said positively. "You would have done, wouldn't you? I know you, my friend!"

Razmyotnov sighed: "If she was my former wife, I'd certainly have dropped in to see her. In fact, I'd have spent at least a week with her!" And he added humorously: "I'm not such a stuffed dummy as you!"

"I know you," Nagulnov repeated. And after a moment's thought he, too, added: "You randy devil! I'm not such a woman-chaser as you!"

Razmyotnov shrugged. "I've been a widower for over twelve years now. What do you expect of me?"

"That's why you do all the chasing."

After a brief silence Razmyotnov said seriously and quietly: "How do you know, perhaps I've been in love with one woman all these twelve years?"

"You?! Expect me to believe that!"

"It's true."

"Who with? Marina Poyarkova?"

"That's none of your business, so keep out of it! I might have told you one day perhaps, when I was sozzled, who I loved and still love, but. . . . You're a cold fish, Makar, it's no good trying to talk to you. What month were you born in?"

"December."

"I thought so. I reckon your mother had you near a hole in the ice. I reckon she went for water and it happened right there on the ice. That's why you've been so perishing chilly all your life. How could anyone pour his heart out to you?"

"Then you must have been born on a hot stove?"

Razmyotnov willingly agreed. "Very likely. That's why I'm always hot as a south-easter. But you're different."

"All right, that'll do," Nagulnov said in annoyance. "We've talked enough about ourselves and women, let's discuss what teams we'll be going into for the harvest."

"Oh no," Razmyotnov retorted, "let's finish what we started with first. We'll have plenty of time to talk about what teams we should join. Just think this over calmly, Makar. You called me a woman-chaser, but how can I be a woman-chaser when I'm just about to invite you both to a wedding?"

"What wedding's this?" Nagulnov asked sternly.

"My own. Mother's a real old woman now, she can't manage the housework any more and she's making me marry."

"And you're going to obey her. you old fool?" Nagulnov could not hide his enormous indignation.

"How can I help it, old chap?" Razmyotnov replied with feigned resignation.

"Well, you are a triple fool!" Makar scratched the bridge of his nose thoughtfully and said to Davidov: "We'll have to hire a place and live together, Semyon, or we'll be feeling lonely. And we'll put a notice up on the gate: 'For Bachelors Only'."

But Davidov promptly replied: "No go, Makar—I'm getting married myself. That's why I went to Millerovo."

Nagulnov eyed them both searchingly to see if they were joking, then rose slowly to his feet. His nostrils were dilated, his face pale with agitation.

"Have you both gone mad?! I'm asking you for the last time. Are you serious or are you pulling my leg?" But without waiting for an answer, he spat bitterly on the floor and flung out of the room without another word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sotted with boredom, sinking lower in moral degeneration with every day of their enforced idleness, Polovtsev and Latyevsky were still dragging out their nights and days in Ostrovnov's cramped little parlour.

Messengers had begun to visit them decidedly less frequently of late and the encouraging promises they received from the insurgent headquarters in ordinary-looking but carefully sealed packages had long since lost all value in their eyes.

Of the two, Polovtsev perhaps stood up better to the prolonged confinement. Even outwardly he appeared to have greater composure. But Latyevsky lost control occasionally, and each time in his own peculiar way. Either he would say nothing for days on end and just stare lifelessly at the wall, or else he would become unusually,

irrestrainably talkative. On these occasions, Polovtsev, in spite of the heat, would pull a felt cloak over his head, experiencing an almost irresistible desire to jump up, drag his sword from its sheath and slash with all his strength at Latyevsky's immaculately groomed head. One day after dark Latyevsky slipped unobtrusively out of the house and did not return till just before dawn, bringing with him a great armful of dew-besprinkled flowers.

Alarmed by the absence of his fellow-lodger, Polovtsev had not closed his eyes all night. In terrible anxiety he had listened to every little sound that reached him from outside. Latyevsky, fresh from the night air, stimulated by his walk, and in high spirits, carried in a bucket of water from the porch and placed the flowers in it carefully. The exhausted air of the room was suddenly invaded by the intoxicating fragrance of petunias, sweet tobacco, night violets, and other flowers unknown to Polovtsev. And then something unexpected happened. As he breathed deep of these half-forgotten scents, the iron-willed Captain Polovtsev suddenly burst into tears. He lay on his stinking bed in the half-light of dawn, pressing his sweaty hands to his face, and as the choking sobs rose to his throat turned over sharply towards the wall and bit as hard as he could at the corner of his pillow.

Latyevsky padded about barefoot on the warm floorboards. His sense of delicacy had returned and he whistled arias from the operettas very quietly to himself, pretending not to notice anything.

When he awoke at about eleven in the morning from a brief but troubled sleep, Polovtsev rose with the intention of giving Latyevsky a severe dressing-down for his absence without leave, but instead of doing so he merely said: "You'd better change the water in the bucket, or they'll die."

"It shall be done at once," Latyevsky responded gaily. He brought in a jug of cold well water and splashed the tepid water out of the bucket on to the floor.

"Where did you get the flowers?" Polovtsev asked.

Embarrassed by his display of weakness and ashamed of the tears he had shed in the night, he kept his eyes averted.

Latyevsky shrugged.

"'Get' is not quite the word, Captain Polovtsev. 'Steal' would be harsher but more accurate. As I was strolling past the village school, a divine fragrance assailed my nostrils. So I jumped over the fence into schoolmaster Shpyn's garden and halved the contents of two flowerbeds in order to bring some sort of beauty into our vile existence. I promise to keep you regularly supplied with fresh flowers from now on."

"No, thank you!"

"You know there are certain human feelings you haven't entirely lost," Latyevsky said quietly and looked straight at Polovtsev.

Polovtsev said nothing and pretended not to hear.

They each had their own way of killing time. Polovtsev would sit for hours playing patience, handling the coarse greasy cards fastidiously with his plump fingers, while Latyevsky lay on his bed, reading for perhaps the twentieth time Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* and savouring every word.

Sometimes Polovtsev would leave his cards, squat cross-legged on the floor Kalmyk fashion with a piece of tarpaulin spread before him and set about stripping and cleaning the already spotless light machine-gun. He would polish every single part, then dab them with gun oil that had grown warm from the heat of the room, and unhurriedly reassemble them, putting his massive head now on one side, now on the other to admire the gun from all angles. Then with a sigh he would roll it

up in a strip of tarpaulin, carefully put it away under the bed, and grease and reload the drums. When he had resumed his seat at the table he would pull his officer's sabre from under his mattress, test the sharpness of the blade on his thumbnail and give its dully gleaming steel a few careful strokes with the whetstone. "Like a razor!" he would mutter with satisfaction.

At such moments Latyevsky would lay aside his book, screw up his solitary eye and grin sarcastically.

"I am astonished, completely astonished at your idiotic sentimentality! You play around with that soused her-ring of yours like a kid with a new toy. Don't forget this is the year 1930 and that the age of the sabre, lance, carbine and other ironmongery is long since past. Artillery, my dear fellow, decided everything in the last war, not toy soldiers on horses or without them. And it will decide the outcome of future battles and wars. As an old artillery man, I make that statement in the most emphatic terms!"

Polovtsev lowered at him in his usual manner and ground out through his teeth: "Are you expecting to start the uprising with immediate support from howitzer batteries, or from soldiers with sabres? Give me one three-inch battery and I shall gladly leave my sabre in the care of Ostrovnov's wife. But for the time being will you kindly keep quiet. my highly respected braggart! Your sort of talk makes me sick. Brag to your Polish misses about the role of the artillery in the last war, not me. You're always levelling your scorn at me, but you're making a mistake, you representative of great Poland. Your tone and your talk have a bad smell. Even in the 'twenties, I believe, people were saying of your mighty country: 'Poland hasn't rotted yet, but it's already beginning to stink.'"

"My God, what poverty of mind!" Latyevsky exclaimed theatrically. "Cards and sabre, sabre and

cards. . . . You haven't read a single printed word in the last six months. How you've gone to seed! And you used to be a secondary school-teacher. . . ."

"I was a teacher out of necessity, my dear sir! Bitter necessity!"

"I believe your Chekhov has a story about the Cossacks. An ignorant and stupid Cossack landowner lives in his village and his two grown-up idiot sons have only one occupation. One of them tosses the farmyard cocks into the air and the other shoots at them with a shotgun. And so they go on day after day. No books, no culture, no spiritual interests whatsoever. . . . Sometimes I have the impression that you were one of those two sons. Or am I wrong?"

Without replying, Polovtsev would breathe on the lifeless steel of the sabre, watch the bluish shadow spread and slowly melt away, then wipe the blade with the hem of his shirt and carefully, almost lovingly, slide it soundlessly into its battered sheath.

But not always did their sudden bursts of conversation and brief altercations end so peaceably. In the rarely ventilated room it was stuffy; the hot weather made their wretched existence in the Ostrovnovs' house even more intolerable, and more and more often Polovtsev would leap up from his stinking sweat-drenched bed and moan dully: "It's a prison! I shall die in this prison!" Even at night, in his sleep he often uttered that ominous word until finally Latyevsky, his patience exhausted, said to him:

"Captain Polovtsev, one would think you had no other word in your extremely impoverished vocabulary except 'prison'. If you long so much for that charitable institution, my advice to you is to go to the district GPU today and ask them to put you there for about twenty

years, say, not less. I assure you your request will not be refused!"

"Is that an example of Polish wit?" Polovtsev asked smiling crookedly.

Latyevsky shrugged. "You find my humour flat?"

"You're just a swine," Polovtsev said indifferently.

Latyevsky shrugged again and laughed drily. "Possibly. I have been living so long in your company it's no wonder I've lost my human shape."

After this exchange, not a word passed between them for three days. But on the fourth day they were compelled to talk in spite of themselves.

Early in the morning, before Ostrovnov had gone off to work, two strangers entered the yard, one in a dusty tarpaulin raincoat, the other in a new mackintosh. One of them had a bulky brief-case tucked under his arm, the other carried a whip with smart leather tassels over his shoulder. By long agreement, Ostrovnov, on seeing the two newcomers, walked quickly into the passage, knocked twice on the door of the room where Polovtsev and Latyevsky were living, then went out on the steps with a dignified air, stroking his moustache.

"Are you to see me, good people? Or is it something from the collective-farm store you'd be wanting? Who might you be? Where are you from?"

The stocky thickset man with the brief-case smiled cordially, his plump cheeks breaking into womanish dimples, and touched the peak of his worn cap. "Are you the master of the house? Good day to you, Yakov Lukich. Your neighbours sent us. We're cattle purveyors, we work for the miners. We're buying up cattle to provide their daily rations, as they say. Our prices are good, higher than the state's. We pay more because we want to give the miners good regular meals. You're the collective farm's store manager, so you ought to understand what we're after.... But we don't need anything from

the farm's stores, we're buying privately-owned cattle. We've been told you've got a year-old calf. Perhaps you'd like to sell it? We won't argue about the price as long as she's got some flesh on her."

Ostrovnov scratched his eyebrow and said nothing for a moment, trying to work out just how much he could squeeze out of these generously disposed customers instead of making a journey to market, then answered as any farmer who knew how to strike a good bargain would: "I've no calf that's up for sale."

"But maybe we could have a look at it and strike a bargain? I tell you again we're ready to pay pretty high."

And after a minute's silence Ostrovnov, stroking his moustache for greater effect, and pausing between his words as if talking to himself, replied: "I have a calf ... she's fat as butter! But I need her myself. Our cow's as old as the hills and wants changing, and it's a fine breed for milk and cream. No, comrades, I won't sell."

The stocky fellow with the brief-case gave a sigh of disappointment. "Well, the owner knows best. . . . Beg pardon for bothering you, we'll try somewhere else." And touching his battered cap awkwardly once again, he turned and walked away.

The burly, broad-shouldered herdsman strolled after him, toying with his whip and staring absent-mindedly across the yard at the house, the outbuildings, the windows, the firmly closed door of the attic.

It was more than Ostrovnov's thrifty heart could bear. He let the visitors get as far as the gate, then called out: "Wait a bit! Hey there, comrade purveyor! How much do you pay for a kilogramme of live weight?"

"That depends. But I've told you already we don't drive a hard bargain, it's up to us how we spend our money. We won't throw it away, but we shan't grudge it for something worthwhile," the stocky man said

boastfully, slapping his fat brief-case as he waited expectantly at the gate.

Ostrovnov walked down the steps resolutely.

"Come and see the calf before she goes out with the herd. But I'm not selling her cheap, mind you. It's a favour because you seem to be agreeable chaps and not too stingy. I don't want any stingy merchants in my yard!"

Both buyers examined and felt the calf with scrupulous care, then the stocky fellow began to haggle, while the man with the whip wandered off whistling idly round the yard and outhouses, peering into the hen-house and the empty stables and all kinds of other unnecessary places. And suddenly it dawned on Ostrovnov—these aren't the right kind of customers for me!

He at once knocked seventy-five rubles on his price and said: "All right, I'll sell at a loss. For the miners' sake. Excuse me now but I've got to be down at the office, I've no time to waste with you. Will you take the calf now? Cash down then!"

The purveyor stood at the door of the shed and with much delay and licking of his forefinger counted out the bank-notes. He added an extra fifteen rubles on top of the agreed price, shook hands with the disconcerted Ostrovnov and gave him a sly wink: "What about wetting the bargain, Yakov Lukich? We always keep a bottle handy in our job." And in a leisurely manner he pulled out of his pocket a bottle of vodka that gleamed faintly in the early sunlight.

Ostrovnov did his best to appear jovial. "This evening, dear friends, this evening! I'll be glad to see you this evening and have a drink with you. There's a drop of the stuff that cheers in our house, too, we're not too poor for that yet. But excuse me now. My health won't allow me to drink in the morning and my job won't either. I must be off to work at the collective farm. Drop in after sundown, then we'll drink to the sale."

"Won't you even invite us into the house and treat us to the milk of the calf's mama?" the stocky fellow said, his dimpled cheeks glowing benevolently, and gave Ostrovnov a persuasive nudge.

But Ostrovnov had screwed himself up into a tight little ball of will-power and concentration and was determined not to yield.

"Our Cossack hospitality's not just to be had for the asking," he replied with a note of contempt in his voice. "Our guests come when they're invited. Maybe it's different with you? But now you'll have to stick to our ways. We agreed to meet this evening, didn't we? No need to waste words in the morning then. Good-day!"

Turning his back on his customers and not even glancing at the calf, which the burly herdsman unhurriedly put on a rope, Ostrovnov slouched off to the porch. With a show of coughing and groaning, his left hand pressed to the small of his back, he climbed the steps, and only when he was inside the porch did he clasp his hand to his chest without a trace of pretence and stand for a minute with his eyes closed. "Damn and curse the lot of you!" he muttered through pale lips. The stabbing pain in his heart quickly subsided, so did his fit of dizziness. He stood for a few moments more, then respectfully but insistently knocked at the door of the room where Polovtsev was living.

When he stepped over the threshold he scarcely managed to say, "Your Honour, we're in trouble!" As if by a flash of lightning on a stormy night he saw the barrel of a revolver pointing straight at him, Polovtsev's massive jutting jaw, and Latyevsky seated on the bed in a careless attitude but with his shoulders pressed firmly against the wall and the machine-gun resting on his knees, its barrel aimed at the door at the exact level of Ostrovnov's chest. Ostrovnov saw all this in a moment of blinding vision, he noticed even Latyevsky's smile

and the feverish gleam of his solitary eye. "Who was that you brought into your yard, dear host?" The question seemed to reach him from far away.

The started Ostrovnov could not recognise the voice. It was as if some invisible third person had questioned him in a low stabbing whisper. But some external force wrought a brief change in the old man. His arms that had been pulled back in the position of attention relaxed, his figure seemed to droop and grow limp. He still spoke incoherently and in gasps, but his tone had changed.

"I didn't bring anybody in, they came by themselves without being asked. And how much longer are you, officer gentlemen, going to shout at me day in day out and order me around like a little boy? I'm tired of it! I feed you and do everything for you for nothing. And our women wash your clothes and make your food for nothing. . . . You can kill me now, this minute, but with you in the house life's a burden anyhow. I've even sold my calf at a loss because I've got to keep you fed somehow. It's no good giving Your Honours plain cabbage soup, you've got to have meat in it. And you're always demanding vodka of me. . . . I warned you when these unwelcome guests turned up in the yard. It wasn't till afterwards that I guessed they weren't the right kind of customers and showed them the gate. Let 'em take the calf for nothing, I thought, as long as they go away. And you, Your Honours. . . . But what's the good o' telling you?" Ostrovnov made a despairing gesture and leaned against the door-post, burying his face in his hands.

With the strange indifference that had possessed him for some time now Polovtsev suddenly said in a surprisingly colourless voice: "I suppose the old man's right, Latyevsky. Things don't smell too good. We'd better get out of here before it's too late. Your opinion?"

"We must leave today," Latyevsky replied decisively, lowering the machine-gun carefully on to the crumpled bed.

"What about contacts?"

"We'll discuss that later," Latyevsky indicated Ostrovnov with a nod. Then he addressed him sharply: "Now stop acting like an old woman, Lukich! Tell us what you talked to your customers about. Did they pay you in full? Those merchants won't be coming back again, will they?"

Ostrovnov gave a childish sob, blew his nose on the hem of his loose unbelted shirt, wiped his moustache and beard with his hand and briefly, without raising his eyes, told of his conversation with the cattle buyers and of the suspicious conduct of the herdsman, not forgetting to mention that they would both return to celebrate the sale with him that evening.

At this news Polovtsev and Latyevsky exchanged silent glances.

"Very nice," Latyevsky commented with a strained laugh. "Couldn't you have thought of anything more sensible than to invite them into your house? You crass idiot!"

"I didn't invite them, they forced themselves on me. They wanted to come inside this very minute. I only just managed to persuade them to wait till evening. And you, Your Honour, or whatever they call you over there, you needn't call me names and make me out to be a fool. Why in the devil's name—God forgive me—should I call them into the house when you're hiding here? To get you shot, and myself, too?"

Ostrovnov's watery eyes glinted sullenly and he concluded with unconcealed anger: "Up to 1917 you, officer gentlemen, thought you were the only clever ones, and the soldiers and rank-and-file Cossacks just a pack of fools. The Reds have been teaching you and teaching

you, but you don't seem to have learnt anything. The teaching and the beating—it's all been wasted on you!"

Polovtsev winked at Latyevsky. The latter bit his lip and turned away in silence towards the shrouded window. Polovtsev went up to Ostrovnov and placed his hand on his shoulder with a smile of appeasement.

"Now then, Lukich, don't upset yourself over nothing! A man can say all kinds of things in the heat of the moment. We don't mean all we say. There's one thing you're right about though. The men who bought your calf are as much cattle purveyors as I'm a bishop. They're both GPU men. Latyevsky recognised one of them by sight. Understand? They're looking for us, but so far they're groping in the dark, and that's why they're here in disguise. Now go and occupy your customers for two or three hours. Do what you like with them, take them to any of your friends who may be at home, drink vodka with them, have a chat, but God help you if you get drunk and let anything out! If I find out, I'll kill you! Remember that! And while you're keeping them busy drinking, we'll slip away quietly along the ravine at the back of your yard and into the steppe. Then they can whistle for us! Tell your son to go at once and hide my sword, the machine-gun, the drums, and both our rifles in the dung shed."

"Only your rifle. I want mine with me," Latyevsky interrupted.

Polovtsev gave him a silent look and went on: "Let him wrap it all up in sacking and take it out to the shed—but mind he has a look round first. Don't hide anything in the house. And one more request. In fact, it's an order. The packets that come here addressed to me must be put under the millstone that's lying by the barn. We'll drop in occasionally at night and pick them up. Have you understood everything?"

"Everything," Ostrovnov whispered.

"Well, go along and don't let those damned cattle purveyors out of your sight! Get them as far away from here as you can; we'll be gone in two hours. In the evening you can invite them round here. Put these beds away in the attic and air the room. Put any old junk you've got in here as a blind. Then, if they ask you, you can show them the whole house. That's probably what they'll try to do under various pretexts. We'll be away for a week, but we shall come back. Don't throw reproaches at us for the food we've eaten. You'll be more than rewarded for all you've spent when the hour of victory strikes. But we must return because I shall start the uprising in my sector from Gremyachy. And the hour is near!" Polovtsev ended solemnly, and put his arms round Ostrovnov in a brief embrace. "Go now, old man, and may the Lord assist you!"

As soon as the door had closed behind Ostrovnov, Polovtsev sat down at the table and asked: "Where did you meet that security man? Are you sure you're not making a mistake?"

Latyevsky drew up a stool, leaned towards Polovtsev and perhaps for the first time since they had known each other spoke without irony or facetiousness.

"Mother of Jesus! How could I be mistaken? I shall remember that man to the end of my days! Did you see the scar on his cheek? It was I who slashed him with a dagger when they arrested me. And this left eye of mine—he knocked it out during the interrogation. Did you see the pair of fists he's got? That was four years ago, in Krasnodar. I was betrayed by a woman. She is dead now, praise the Lord! Her guilt was established while I was still in the inner prison. The second day after my escape she ceased to exist. She was a beautiful young creature—a Kuban Cossack, or rather, a Ku-

ban bitch. That's how it was. . . . Do you know how I escaped?" Latyevsky laughed complacently and rubbed his small thin hands. "I was to be shot in any case. So I had nothing to lose. I took a desperate chance, played rather a dirty trick, in fact. While I tried to fuddle the interrogators and pretended to be a mere pawn in the game, they kept me in strict isolation. Then I played my last card: I betrayed one of our Cossacks in Korenovskaya. He was in our organisation, but he was the last link in the chain. There were only three other people in his village he could give away, he knew nobody else at all. So I thought, let them shoot or exile those four idiots, but I shall get away and my life is far more valuable to the organisation than the lives of these cattle. In fact, I had rather an important position in our Kuban network. You can judge that by the fact that since 1922 I have crossed the frontier five times, and five times met Kutepov in Paris. I gave away those four pawns but got round the interrogator. He allowed me to take exercise in the inner yard with the other prisoners. There was no time to lose. You understand? And that evening, as soon as I began strolling round the yard with a crowd of Kuban bumpkins that were due for extermination, I noticed that there was a ladder from the yard on to a hayloft—it couldn't have been there long. It was hay-time and the GPU men were bringing in fodder for their horses during the day. I went round the circle again hands behind my back, in the approved fashion, then walked up to the ladder and, without looking round, started climbing it circus-fashion, quite slowly and still keeping my hands behind my back. My calculations proved correct, Captain Polovtsev! Psychologically correct. Bewildered by my amazing audacity, the guards allowed me to climb about eight steps without hindrance before one of them bawled: 'Halt!' I ducked down and took the last two

steps at a bound, then jumped like a goat on to the roof. Haphazard firing, shouts, curses! Two more leaps and I was on the edge of the roof, then a jump into the street! And away! The next morning I was in Maikop in hiding with a very safe contact. . . . The name of that brute who disfigured me is Khizhnyak. You have just seen him, that stone image in trousers. Do you expect me to let him get away alive? No, both his eyes shall close for the one he deprived me of! It'll be two eyes for an eye!"

"You must be mad!" Polovtsev exclaimed indignant-ly. "Do you want to ruin the cause just for the sake of personal revenge?"

"Don't worry. I shall not kill Khizhnyak and his friend here. I shall lie in wait for them some distance from the village. It will look like a highway robbery, that's all. I shall take their money. The kind of accident that happens to all bad merchants. . . . Hide your rifle and I'll carry mine out under my coat. Don't think you can talk me out of it. My decision is immutable, do you hear! I shall leave now. You will follow. We shall meet on Saturday after sunset, in the woods near Tubyanskoy, by the spring where we met last time. Good-bye and, for God's sake, don't be angry with me, Captain Polovtsev! We have just about reached the limit of each other's endurance while we've been here and I must confess I have not always been up to standard in my behaviour."

"Save your apologies. . . . We can do without sentiment in our position," Polovtsev muttered in confusion. Nevertheless he embraced Latyevsky and with fatherly affection pressed his lips to the other's pale sloping forehead.

Latyevsky was moved by this unexpected demonstration of feeling, but not wishing to show his emotion, he stood with his hand on the door handle and his back

to Polovtsev, and said: "I'll take Maxim Kharitonov of Tubyanskoy with me. He has a rifle and he's the kind of man who can be relied on in a tight corner. Have you any objection?"

Polovtsev was silent for a moment, then answered: "Kharitonov was a sergeant-major in my squadron. You've made a good choice. Take him. He's a fine marksman—or used to be anyhow. I understand your feelings. Go ahead, but don't act anywhere near Gremyachy or in any village. Do it somewhere out in the steppe."

"Very well. Good-bye."

"Good luck."

Latyevsky went out into the passage, threw an old coat of Ostrovnov's over his shoulders and peered through a crack in the door at the deserted side street. A minute later he strode unhurriedly across the yard with his cavalry carbine pressed tight against his left side and disappeared round the corner of the shed. But as soon as he jumped into the ravine he was transformed. He slipped his arms into the sleeves of the coat, picked up the carbine, released the safety catch and stalked up the gully like a beast of prey, glancing vigilantly from side to side, listening to every rustle and looking back occasionally at the village which lay below in a haze of violet morning mist.

Two days later, on Friday morning the two purveyors and one of their team of horses were killed on the road between Tubyanskoy and Voiskovoy about sixty paces from the mouth of Maple Ravine. The Cossack driver from Tubyanskoy got away by cutting the traces on the remaining horse, and galloped to Voiskovoy. It was he who reported the incident at the village Soviet.

The local militiaman, the chairman of the village Soviet, the driver himself and the witnesses, who went out to the scene of the crime, made the following observations. Bandits hiding in the wood had fired about ten rifle shots. The first killed the burly herdsman, who fell face downwards from the drozhky with a bullet in his heart. His stocky companion shouted wildly at the driver to gallop, snatched the whip from his hand and made as if to lash the right-hand horse, but the second bullet laid him flat in the drozhky before he could do so. He was hit in the head, just above the left ear. The horses bolted. The dead man rolled off the drozhky about twenty paces from where his companion the herdsman had fallen. There were a few more shots from two rifles firing at once. The left-side horse was hit and went down at full gallop, breaking the shaft and overturning the drozhky. The driver cut the surviving horse free and galloped clear. Several shots were fired after him, but more to frighten than to kill, for, according to the driver himself, the bullets whistled high over his head.

The pockets of both victims had been emptied. No papers were left on them. The brief-case belonging to one of them was found lying empty in the roadside grass. The left eye of the herdsman, whom the bandits had turned over on his back in the course of their search, had been crushed out, judging from the marks, by the heel of a boot.

The chairman of the village Soviet, a hard-boiled Cossack, who had been through two wars, said to the militiaman: "Look at that, Luka Nazarich, one of the swine took a kick at a dead man. Must have been paying off an old score, eh? Or maybe it was over a woman? Ordinary bandits don't go in for that kind of thing. . . ." And trying not to look at the gaping crimson

eyesocket and the bloody jelly-like mass that had spread over the cheek and was already congealing, he covered the dead man's face with his handkerchief and straightened up with a sigh. "They're a bad lot nowadays, these bandits! They must have been after these merchants for their money. Got away with a good few thousand, I reckon.... Terrible people! Fancy killing a couple of fine chaps like these just for money."

That day, when the rumour of the death of Khizhnyak and Glukhov alias Boiko reached Gremyachy, Nagulnov asked Davidov as soon as they were alone together in the farm management office: "D'you realise the way things are heading, Semyon?"

"As well as you do. Polovtsev or his men had a hand in it, that's a fact!"

"Of course. There's only one thing I don't get. How did they guess who they were—that's the question! And who could have done it?"

"We can't solve that question. That's an equation with two unknown quantities, and neither of us are much good at algebra or arithmetic. Are we?"

Nagulnov sat in silence with one leg over the other, surveying the toe of his dusty boot with unseeing eyes, then he said: "One unknown quantity is known to me...."

"Which?"

"The fact that no wolf kills near his own den."

"What does that tell you?"

"That the killers weren't from Tubyanskoy or Voiskovoy, but farther away. That's definite!"

"From Shakhty or Rostov, you think?"

"Not necessarily. Maybe from our own village. Why not?"

"Could be," Davidov said after a moment's thought. "What do you suggest, Makar?"

"That the Communists should keep their eyes open. They've got to sleep less at night and go around the village very quiet, keeping a sharp look-out. Maybe we'll have the luck to meet this Polovtsev or some suspicious acquaintance of his. Wolves work at night."

"You comparing us to wolves?" Davidov remarked with a faint smile.

But Nagulnov did not return his smile and, knitting his bushy eyebrows, said: "They're the wolves and we're the wolf-hunters. Use your brains!"

"All right, don't get worked up. I agree with you, that's a fact! Let's get all the Communists together right now."

"Not now, a bit later on, when people have gone to bed."

"Right again," Davidov agreed. "But we don't want to go patrolling the village or we'll put the Cossacks on guard right away. We must lie in wait."

"Yes, but not just anywhere. That's no use! It was easy for me to keep watch for Timofei. Lushka was the only person he could go to. But where can we lie in wait for these? The world's a big place and there are a lot of houses in the village. You can't keep watch on 'em all."

"No need to."

"How do we choose then?"

"We'll find out where the purveyors bought cattle and keep those houses under observation. Our dead comrades spent most of their time keeping an eye on the suspicious characters and buying their cattle. And that's where the bandits will make for. Understand?"

"You're a brainy chap!" Nagulnov said with conviction. "You get some real sound ideas in your head sometimes!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Polovtsev and Latyevsky had again taken up their quarters in Ostrovnov's parlour and had been living there for three days. They had arrived at dawn, half an hour after Razmyotnov, who had been watching the Ostrovnovs' house from a neighbouring orchard, gave a last yawn, got up and walked slowly home. Semyon gets some crazy ideas sometimes, he thought to himself. Snooping round other folk's yards, hiding like horse stealers or common thieves all night long, and nothing to show for it. Where are these bandits? We're just chasing our own shadow.... I'd better get a move on or some early bird among the women will get up to milk the cow and see me, and then it'll be all round the village—Razmyotnov had the dawn chasing him last night! Who was the lusty wench gave him such a doing he couldn't get his eyes open till daybreak? Once they start their chin-wagging I'll lose all my authority. This thing has got to stop. Let the GPU catch the bandits, there's no need for us to take over their job. What am I fit for after spending the night wearing my eyes out like this? Nodding over my desk in the office? Staring at folk with bleary eyes? Again they'll be saying: "Spends all night on the tiles and now he's yawning his head off! This kind of thing will ruin my authority."

Tortured by doubts, jaded after his sleepless night, and almost convinced the scheme was a failure, Razmyotnov crept into his own yard—and on the doorstep bumped straight into his own mother, who had just come out into the porch.

"It's me, mother," Andrei mumbled, trying to get past her into the porch.

But the old woman barred his way and said sternly: "I can see it's you, I'm not blind. Isn't it time you had done with this gadding about at nights, Andrei? You're

not a young man and you sowed your wild oats long ago. Isn't it time you started considering what your mother and other people think of you? Get married and put a rein on yourself. You've had enough!"

"Shall I marry now or wait till the sun's up?" Andrei asked irritably.

"It can rise three times if you like—I'm not hurrying you—but don't be any longer about it," his mother answered quite seriously, ignoring her son's sarcasm. "Have a thought for my old age! It's hard for me with all my old woman's aches and pains to go a milking and cooking and washing for you, and looking after the garden and doing everything in the house. Can't you see that, son? You don't lift a finger to do anything in the house! What help are you to me? You won't even bring a pail of water. You just eat your food and off you go to work, like a lodger, like a stranger in the house. The only thing you show any care for are the pigeons, danc-ing around after them like a little boy. Is that a man's job? You ought to be ashamed of playing boy's games. Why, if it wasn't for Nyura helping me, I'd have been in my grave long ago! Are you so blind, my dear, you can't see she's always coming round to do something? Either she'll milk the cow or she'll weed and water the vegetables, or some other job. She's such a nice affectionate girl you couldn't find another like her in the whole district! And she can't keep her eyes off you. But you can't see it because you've gone blind with all your gadding about! Now where have you been this time? Just look at yourself. You're all covered in burs, like a dog that's been a roaming. Bend down a minute, trouble of my life! Where on earth did you get yourself in such a state?"

The old woman placed her hand on her son's shoulder and made him bend a little, and, when Andrei had lowered his head, with some difficulty disentangled

several dry thistle burs of deadly sticking power from his greying forelock.

Andrei straightened up and gave a short laugh, looking openly into his mother's disgusted face.

"Don't think badly of me, mother! I wasn't lying in the thistles for fun. It was for a purpose. You wouldn't understand just yet, but you will one day, when the time comes. And as for my wedding, that time limit of yours—three days—is a sight too big. I'll bring Nyura home tomorrow. But remember, mother, you've chosen your own daughter-in-law, so mind you get on with her and don't have any rows. As for me, I'm easy-going as long as people leave me alone. But let me pass now, I want to get an hour's sleep before work."

The old woman stepped aside, crossing herself.

"Praise the Lord for making you show a little mercy on my old age. Go along, dear, go and have a sleep, my son, and I'll make you some pancakes for breakfast. I've got some cream for you. I just don't know how to please you for the joy you've given me."

Andrei had closed the door firmly behind him, but the old woman said as quietly as if he were still standing beside her: "You're all I have in the whole wide world!" And burst into tears.

And so at dawn in different corners of the village, Andrei Razmyotnov, Davidov, who had spent all night under the shed in Atamanchukov's yard, and Nagulnov, who had kept ceaseless watch on Bannik's premises, and Polovtsev and Latyevsky, who had slipped safely into Ostrovnov's house—all went to bed at one and the same time.

No doubt, on that quiet mist-veiled summer's morning these men, so different in character and mind, had different dreams, but they all fell asleep at the same hour.

The first to awake was Andrei Razmyotnov. He shaved his cheeks blue, washed his head, put on a clean

shirt and the serge trousers that had been passed on to him by direct right of inheritance from Marina Poyarkova's former husband and spent a long time spitting on his boots and polishing them with a dry rag cut from the hem of an old army greatcoat. He made ready in a thoughtful fashion without undue haste.

His mother guessed what these preparations were for, but she asked no questions, fearing to banish her son's mood. She merely glanced at him now and then and spent a little more time than usual fussing round the stove. They had breakfast in silence.

"Don't expect me before evening, mother," Razmyotnov warned her in a formal tone.

"May the Lord help you," his mother replied.

"Some hopes..." he commented sceptically.

Unlike Davidov, he set about making his proposal in a business-like fashion and got it over in ten minutes. On entering the house of Nyura's parents, however, he did show some respect for convention. He sat quietly smoking for about two minutes, exchanged a few comments with Nyura's father about the harvest prospects and the weather, then came straight out with his proposal as if it were something that had long since been decided.

"I'll be taking Nyura tomorrow."

The bride's father, who was not without a sense of humour, asked: "What for? Messenger duty at the Soviet?"

"Worse. To be my wife."

"That's up to her."

Razmyotnov turned to the furiously blushing girl—there was not a shadow of a smile on his usually humorous lips.

"Willing?" he asked.

"I've been willing for ten years," the girl answered firmly, her bold round eyes fixed lovingly on Andrei.

"Well, that's that," Razmyotnov pronounced with satisfaction.

In deference to custom, the parents tried to appear reluctant, but Andrei merely lighted another cigarette and resolutely cut short their pretence.

"I'm not trying to squeeze a dowry or anything out of you. And what is there for you to squeeze out of me? Tobacco smoke? Get the girl ready, we'll go off to the stanitsa today and get registered, and tomorrow we'll hold the wedding. And that'll be that!"

"And what's made you so anxious all of a sudden?" the bride's mother asked peevishly.

But Razmyotnov eyed her coldly and replied: "All I've ever cared for burned itself out twelve years ago, burned itself to ashes. . . . And I'm in a hurry because I've got the harvest on my heels, and at home the old woman wants to retire altogether. So let's settle it this way. I'll bring the vodka from the stanitsa—not more than twenty bottles. You make the food and invite the guests accordingly. On my side there'll be three: mother, Davidov and Shaly."

"What about Nagulnov?"

"He's ill," Andrei replied untruthfully, for he was sure Makar would not turn up for the wedding on any account.

"Shall we kill a sheep, Comrade Razmyotnov?"

"That's up to you. But we shan't have any high jinks—I'm not supposed to. I'd get kicked out of my job and collect such a hot Party reprimand I'd be blowing on the fingers I held the glass with for twelve months." He turned to his bride, gave her a gallant wink and a not very generous smile, and said: "I'll be round in half an hour. Dress yourself up decently, Nyura. You're marrying the chairman of the village Soviet, you know, not just anyone."

It was a sad wedding, without songs or dancing, without the jokes and merry-making that are part of any Cossack wedding, without its wishes for the young couple, sometimes free, sometimes too free. . . . It was Razmyotnov who set the tone. He was unfittingly serious, restrained and sober. He took scarcely any part in the conversation and was silent most of the time. And when the slightly tipsy guests now and then shouted the customary "Bitter!", he would as if under compulsion turn his head to his buxom wife and with apparent reluctance put his cold lips to hers. And his eyes, usually so full of life, seemed to be looking not at the guests, not even at his bride, but somewhere far away, into the distant, very distant and sombre past.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Meanwhile life in Gremyachy Log and above it went on its way with the same eternally majestic and hasteless tread. Still from time to time the white, frost-white clouds floated over the village, and sometimes their colour and shading changed, varying from a deep tempestuous blue to no colour at all; and sometimes, smouldering or burning bright at sunset, they foretold a wind on the coming day, and then in every house and yard the women and children would hear from their masters, or those who intended becoming masters, those calm brief phrases with their incontrovertible power of conviction, which is also eternal: "What's the use o' shooing or carting in such a wind?" And someone else at the head of the table, a senior member of the family or a neighbour, would wait a little, then answer: "You'd better not try. It'd all get blown away!" And at these times of cruel east winds above and enforced idleness below, in every one of the three hundred yards of the village the

story would be told of a certain long since departed villager, one Ivan Ivanovich Degtyaryov, who many years ago had once tried to cart corn from the fields to his threshing floor in an east wind and, seeing the ripe corn being whipped in sheaves and shooks from the load, and giving up all hope of fighting the elements, had lifted on his three-pronged fork a huge bundle of wheat and, looking eastward and addressing the wind, had bawled out furiously: "Come on then, carry this 'un away if you're so strong! Come on, curse you!" And having tipped over the cart with its high-piled load of wheat, drove home empty, cursing fiercely the while.

Life went on in Gremyachy Log without hastening its leisurely pace, and every day and every night brought to one or another of the hamlet's three hundred houses joys, big and small, disappointment and anxiety, and grief that did not quickly fade. On Monday at dawn Grandad Agei, who had been the village herdsman for time out of mind, died on the patch of grazing land outside the village. He had run to head off a playful young cow that was straying from the herd, but his hobbling old man's trot had not taken him far when he suddenly halted with his whip pressed to his heart, swayed for a minute, sagging at the knees, then, staggering like a drunkard and dropping his whip, he turned and walked slowly back. Beskhlebnov's daughter-in-law, who was also bringing in a cow, ran up to him and grasped the old man's cold hands, panting hotly into his glassy eyes. "Grandad, dear, d'you feel bad?" And the next moment her voice rose to a wail: "Dear grandad! How can I help you?"

Grandad Agei just managed to force out the words: "Don't be afraid, my little one. . . . Hold my arm, dear, or I'll fall. . . ."

Then he fell, first on to his right knee, then rolling over on his side. And so he died. And it was all over.

At dinner-time two young women of the collective farm gave birth almost at the same moment. One had a very bad time. Davidov had to send the first available drozhky urgently to Voiskovoy for the district doctor. He had only just returned from Grandad Agei's bereaved household, where he had been paying his last respects to the dead man, when Mikhei Kuznetsov, a young member of the farm, rushed in to see him. Pale and anxious, he shouted from the door:

"Dear Comrade Davidov, help us for God's sake! My woman's been suffering for more than a day. She just can't give birth. I've got two kids, and I'd be awful sorry to lose her anyway. Give us some horses, we've got to have a doctor. Our old women can't do anything for her!"

"Come on," Davidov said and went out into the yard

Grandad Shchukar had driven out into the steppe for hay. All the horses were out.

"Let's make for your house. We'll send off the first cart we meet to Voiskovoy. You go back to your wife and I'll send the first cart that comes along."

Davidov knew perfectly well that it was not the thing for a man to hang about a place where a woman was giving birth, but as he paced up and down in front of the Kuznetsovs' little cottage, staring along the deserted street and listening to the woman's muffled groans and drawn-out shrieks, he moaned quietly to himself at the thought of a suffering he would never know, and cursed under his breath with the blackest words in his sailor's vocabulary. And when he saw a team's waterboy—sixteen-year-old Andrei Akimov—jogging gently down the street, he ran forward like a boy himself, stopped the drozhky, heaved the full barrel of water off it with rather an effort, and breathing heavily, said: "Look here, lad, there's a woman in difficulties here. You've got some good horses, drive 'em as fast as you can to

Voiskovoy and bring me back a doctor—dead or alive! If you kill the horses, I'm responsible, that's a fact!"

Again the low and muffled cry of a woman in mortal agony penetrated the stagnant midday stillness and broke off short. Davidov looked straight into the boy's eyes and said: "D'you hear? Off you go then!"

The lad stood up to his full height in the drozhky and gave Davidov a quick grown-up look.

"I know just what you mean, Uncle Semyon. And don't worry about the horses!"

The horses leapt into a gallop. The boy, still standing up, gave a wild whistle and flourished his whip and Davidov, staring at the dust spurting from under the wheels, dropped his hands in a helpless gesture and walked off to the management office. As he went, he again heard that wild cry and winced as if in pain, and only when he had gone some distance down the street, did he mutter in annoyance: "Having a baby of all things, and can't manage the job properly. Humph!"

In the office he had scarcely got his mind focused on what are commonly called the affairs of the day when a young and bashful young man, son of the old collective farmer Abramov, came in and, shifting from one foot to the other, said nervously: "Comrade Davidov, we're holding a wedding today and the whole family wants to invite you. It'll be awkward if you aren't at table."

Davidov's patience snapped. He leapt up from his chair and exclaimed: "Has the whole village gone mad, or what?! Dying, having babies and getting married all in one day! Is this a plot?!"

Then he chuckled at his own outburst and said calmly: "Why be in such a devil of a hurry? You could have married in autumn. Autumn's just the time for weddings."

The lad fidgeted as if he were standing on hot coals. "The situation won't let us wait till autumn."

"What situation?"

"Can't you guess, Comrade Davidov?"

"Aha, so that's it. . . . Well, you should always consider the situation in advance," Davidov remarked instructively. But the next moment he smiled, reflecting that he himself had no right to talk.

After a significant pause, he added: "All right, go along now. We'll drop in this evening for a minute, all of us. Have you told Razmyotnov and Nagulnov?"

"I've already invited them."

"Well, the three of us will come round then. We'll stay an hour or so. We shan't do much drinking, it's the wrong time for it, so don't be disappointed. Now off you go, and good luck to you. But I suppose we'll be wishing you that this evening. . . . Is she very big?"

"Not all that big, but it shows. . . ."

"It's always better when it shows," Davidov remarked, becoming didactic again, and smiled once more as he noticed the flaw in his own argument.

And an hour later when Davidov was signing the day's report, the happy father, Mikhei Kuznetsov, came rushing in, swept Davidov up in his arms and showered him with words of gratitude.

"Christ save you, chairman! Andrei brought the doctor and he was only just in time. The wife nearly breathed her last. But with his help she's turned me out a son—why, he's like a young calf, you can hardly lift him! Doctor says he didn't come out the right way. But I don't care how he came—I've got a boy in the family! You'll be the godfather, Comrade Davidov!"

Davidov rubbed his forehead. "I will. I'm real glad your wife's all right after all. If there's anything you need in the way of supplies, see Ostrovnov tomorrow. He'll be given an order, that's a fact. As for the lad

coming the wrong way—that's nothing. Remember this, there aren't many lads that come the right way. Real lads, that is. . . ." And this time he did not even smile, for he was no longer aware of his didactic tone, which had made him chuckle a little while ago.

So our sailor must have been getting sentimental if another's joy and the happy outcome of maternal suffering could make him feel watery about the eyes. Feeling the tears there, he covered his eyes with his big hand and said rather roughly: "You'd better go, your wife's waiting for you. Come round if you need anything, but get along now. I've no time to waste. Can't you see I've plenty to do without you around."

Towards evening on that day, an exceptional event occurred which, though it passed almost unnoticed by anyone in the village, was of no small importance to Gremyachy Log. At about seven o'clock, a rather smart drozhky drove up to the Ostrovnovs' house. It was drawn by a fine pair of horses. A man of medium height in a canvas jacket and trousers stepped out of it at the gate. He shook out the turn-ups of his dusty trousers with the fastidiousness of an old man, then with youthful vigour mounted the steps of the house and strode confidently into the porch, where he was already awaited by the anxious Ostrovnov. He gripped Ostrovnov's elbow firmly with a small thin hand and gave him a cordial smile that exposed for a moment his dark smoke-stained teeth.

"Is Alexander Anisimovich at home? I can see you're the master of the house. Yakov Lukich, isn't it?"

Recognising the visitor by his poise and bearing, and by his own soldier's instinct, as a person of high rank, Ostrovnov deferentially clicked the heels of his battered shoes and answered hastily: "Your Excellency? Is it you? Goodness me, how they've been waiting for you!"

"Show me in!"

With an alacrity that was quite foreign to his nature Ostrovnov obediently flung open the door of the room where Polovtsev and Latyevsky were living. "Alexander Anisimovich, beg pardon for not reporting, we've a welcome guest to see us!"

The visitor stepped across the threshold and opened his arms with a sweeping, theatrical gesture.

"Greetings, dear prisoners! May we speak normally here?"

Polovtsev, who had been sitting at the table, and Latyevsky, as usual lounging on his bed, sprang up as though called to attention.

The visitor embraced Polovtsev and merely slipping his left arm round Latyevsky's shoulders said: "Please, sit down, gentlemen. I am Colonel Sedoy, the man who has been sending you orders. By the will of fate, I am at present an agronomist for the regional agricultural board. As you see, I am here on a tour of inspection. My time is limited. I must report to you on the situation."

With exaggerated friendliness, still smiling-and showing his smoke-stained teeth, the visitor went on: "You seem to be in poor straits here. Even for a guest you have nothing. . . . But this is no time to talk of hospitality, I shall dine elsewhere. Kindly invite my driver to table and make arrangements for guarding us or at least keeping watch."

Polovtsev sprang obediently to the door, but the colonel's tall, well-knit driver was already entering. He held out his hand to Polovtsev: "I salute you, Captain. Russian custom forbids handshaking across the doorstep." And addressing the colonel, he asked respectfully: "May I attend? I've arranged a look-out."

The colonel continued to smile at Polovtsev and Latyevsky with his deep-set grey eyes. "This is Captain Kazantsev, gentlemen. You know our hosts, Captain.

Now, gentlemen, to work. Let us sit down at your bachelor's table."

Polovtsev asked timidly: "Perhaps we may offer you something to eat, Colonel? You are welcome to what simple fare we have."

"No, thank you," the visitor replied drily. "Let us get down to business at once, my time is very short. The map, Captain."

Captain Kazantsev drew a folded tsarist army map of the Azov-Black Sea area from an inside pocket, spread it on the table, and all four men bent over it.

The visitor adjusted the collar of his unbuttoned tunic, took a blue pencil from his pocket and, tapping the table with it, said: "My name, as you probably realise, is not Sedoy—but Nikolsky. Colonel of the Imperial General Staff. This is a small-scale map, but for the operation we have in mind we don't need anything more detailed. Now this is your assignment. You have nearly two hundred active bayonets or sabres. You are to smash the local Communists but on no account get involved in prolonged fighting for trivial objectives. Then march on the Krasnaya Zarya state farm, cutting all communications on the way. There you will do what is required of you and capture as a result about forty rifles with a corresponding supply of ammunition. Now for the vital task. With all your light and heavy machine-guns intact and having acquired about thirty motor lorries at the state farm, you will make a forced march on Millerovo. And yet another vital task.... You see how many vital tasks I am setting you? It is your duty, I order you, Captain, to take by surprise and bottle up the regiment that is stationed in Millerovo. You have got to smash it at one blow, disarm it, capture its guns and ammunition and recruit any Red Army men who will join you, then move on in lorries towards Rostov. I am giving you only the general outlines of the task,

but a lot depends on it. If the worst comes to the worst and you meet resistance on the way to Millerovo, you must bypass Millerovo and make for Kamensk—by this route.” The colonel drew a straight line across the map. “I shall meet you in Kamensk with my detachment.”

After a pause he added: “You may receive support from the north from Lieutenant-Colonel Savvateyev. But don’t rely too much on that. Act independently. Remember that a great deal depends on the success of your operation, I refer to the disarming of the regiment in Millerovo and the capture of its guns and ammunition. They have a battery of artillery that would be of great use to us. From Kamensk we could develop operations for the capture of Rostov, relying on support from our forces on the Kuban and the Terek. Then comes help from the Allies and we shall be masters of the south. I draw your attention to the fact, gentlemen, that our plan involves risk, but we have no alternative! If we fail to use the possibilities history offers us in 1930, we may as well say good-bye to the empire and confine ourselves to small-scale terrorism.... That is all I have to tell you. If you have anything to say, Captain Polovtsev, you may speak now. But remember that I have yet to call at the village Soviet, report my arrival and drive to the district centre. I am an official personage, so to speak, the agricultural board’s agronomist. So give us your opinion as briefly as possible.”

With his eyes averted Polovtsev said huskily: “You have given me a general task, Colonel, without any concrete details. I shall take the state farm. I was expecting that after that we should rouse the Cossacks, but you send me to engage a regular regiment of the Red Army. Don’t you think that is an impossible task with the forces at my disposal? If I encounter as much as a single battalion en route. . . . Aren’t you condemning me to certain disaster?”

Colonel Nikolsky rapped his knuckles on the table and gave a short laugh.

"I think it must have been a mistake when you were granted the rank of captain. If you hesitate at the critical moment and lose faith in the operation we have planned, you are worthless as an officer of the Russian Army! I trust you are not thinking of carrying out independent plans of your own! Is that how I am expected to take your words? Will you act according to orders or must I dismiss you here and now?"

Polovtsev rose. Inclining his massive head, he replied quietly: "I shall carry out your orders, Colonel. But. . . But you will be to blame for the failure of the operation, not I!"

"You needn't worry about that, Captain!" Nikolsky laughed grimly and rose to his feet.

Captain Kazantsev also rose.

Nikolsky took Polovtsev in his arms and said: "Courage and yet more courage! That is what the officers of our fine old Imperial Army lack! You have grown stale in your jobs as petty school-teachers and agronomists. What of our traditions? The glorious traditions of the Russian Army! Have you forgotten them? But never mind. Just make a start, as those who think for you have ordered, and then—appetite comes with the eating! I hope to see you, Captain, in the future as a Major-General in Novorossiisk or, let us say, Moscow. Judging by your unsociable looks, you must have great capabilities. To our meeting in Kamensk! Now for my final word. The order to begin will be a special one, issued simultaneously to all centres of resistance. Good-bye till we meet again in Kamensk!"

Polovtsev coldly embraced the visitors, threw open the door and caught the expectant glance of Ostrovnov, who was standing anxiously in the passage. When the visitors had gone, he fell rather than sat down on his

bed. A little later he asked Latyevsky, who was standing with his back to the window: "Did you ever see such a blighter?"

Latyevsky merely shrugged contemptuously: "Mary, Mother of Jesus! What else did you expect of these Russian warriors! You should ask me, Captain Polovtsev, why in the devil's name I ever joined up with you?!"

And yet another tragic event occurred that day. The goat Trofim was drowned in a well. A vagrant by nature, accustomed to roaming the village at night, he had apparently run into a pack of prowling dogs. In the ensuing chase he had been compelled to jump over the well in the management office yard. Grandad Shchukar had absent-mindedly left the top of the well uncovered that evening and the old goat, frightened by the dogs' furious pursuit, had evidently jumped short, plunged headlong into the well and drowned.

Later in the evening Shchukar had returned with his load of hay and gone to draw water for the stallions. When he tried to use the well, he felt the pail hit something soft. He swung the rope from side to side but all his attempts to draw water proved fruitless. Then the old man, a terrible thought dawning on his mind, looked round the yard with anxious eyes in the hope of seeing his constant enemy somewhere about, on the shed roof perhaps. But he looked in vain—Trofim was nowhere to be seen. Grandad Shchukar hurried over to the hayloft, then trotted to the gate—Trofim was not there. Tearful and wretched in his grief, Shchukar walked into the office where Davidov was sitting and sank down on the bench.

"Now we're in fresh trouble, Semyon, my dear boy—our Trofim must have gone and drowned himself in the well. Let's go and find a hook, we've got to pull him out somehow."

"Why're you so upset about it?" Davidov said with

a smile. "You were always asking to have his throat cut."

"What if I was!" Grandad Shchukar burst out furiously. "We didn't do it, did we? And now how shall I get along without him? He kept me in fear and tremblin' every blessed day. I didn't let the whip out o' my hands in self-defence, but now what kind o' life shall I have? Sheer naked loneliness! I might as well throw myself down that well too. . . . But we weren't friendly! It was just one long battle from start to finish. Sometimes, I'd catch him, the devil, and hold him by the horns. 'Trofim, you son of a so-and-so,' I'd say, 'you're not a young goat. Where d'you get so much temper from? Where d'you get all this fire from that you won't let me rest for a second? You're always a lyin' in wait to give me one from behind. Can't you see I'm a sick man and you ought to have a bit o' pity for me?' And he just looks at me with his starin' eyes, and there's nothin' human in 'em at all. So I gives him a lick with the whip and shouts after him: 'Run away, you old rascal, may the devil take you! It's no good tryin' to get any sense out of you!' And he, the son of a devil, runs about ten paces and starts nibblin' the grass because he's nothin' better to do, as if he was hungry, the villain! But he's got his staring eyes on me all the time and he's just waitin' for the chance to have another go at me. Yes, it was a funny kind o' life I had with him around! Because I just couldn't get any sense out of the silly old idiot. And now he's drowned, and I'm sorry for him, and it's spoilt my whole life. . . ." Grandad Shchukar gave a pitiful sob and wiped his tearful eyes on the sleeve of his dirty cotton shirt.

Davidov and Shchukar found a hook in the neighbouring yard and hauled the sodden body of Trofim out of the well. Turning away from Shchukar, Davidov asked: "Well, what do we do now?"

Grandad Shchukar, still sobbing and wiping his watery eyes, replied: "You go and get on with your affairs o' state, Semyon, and I'll bury him. That's no job for a young man like you, that's an old man's job, that is. I'll dig him deep, the villain, in a proper fashion, and sit and have a cry over his death. . . . Lord bless you for helpin' me to pull him out. I couldn't have managed it alone. He must weigh a good three poods, the horny-headed geldin'. He got himself fat on free grub and that's why he was drowned, the fool. If he'd been lighter he could have jumped over this here well as easy as anythin'! It must have been them dogs scared the guts out of him and made him do such a brainless thing. But what brains could you expect him to have, the old cracked pot? Semyon, old chap, give me the price of a pint of vodka and I'll drink to his memory tonight in the hayloft. There's no sense in me goin' home to the old woman. What'd come of it if I did? Just an upset all round. Or another battle. No, that's not for me at my age. So I'll just have a quiet drink in his memory, then water the horses and go to sleep, that's a fact!"

Doing all he could to restrain a smile, Davidov handed Shchukar a ten-ruble note and put his arm round the old man's narrow shoulders: "Don't you take it too much to heart, grandad. If need be, we'll buy you another goat."

Shaking his head sadly, Grandad Shchukar replied: "You'll never buy another goat like that for any money, there's never been a goat like that anywhere in the world! I'll keep my grief to myself." And he went off to find a shovel, a pitiful bent little figure, touchingly absurd in his unaffected grief.

And thus ended a day filled with events great and small in Gremyachy Log.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

After supper Davidov withdrew to his room and had only just sat down to look through the newspapers that had arrived from the post-office, when he heard a quiet tap on the edge of the window-frame. He opened the window. Nagulnov with one foot on the ledge round the cottage wall whispered up at him: "There's work to be done! Look out, I'm coming in. I've got something to tell you."

His brown face was pale and alert. He swung his leg lightly over the window-sill, reached the stool in a single stride and sat down, striking his knee with his fist.

"It's turned out just how I warned you, Semyon! I've spotted one of 'em. I lay for two solid hours outside Ostrovnov's place, and there he comes—a shortish chap, creeping along furtive-like, so it must have been one o' them bastards. I was a bit late in taking up my position and it was mighty dark—I'd been out in the fields. Another may have come in before this one. Anyhow, let's go. We'll pick up Razmyotnov on the way—there's no point in wasting time. We'll catch 'em napping, at Ostrovnov's! And if we don't get 'em all, at least we'll catch this one.'"

Davidov felt under his pillow and pulled out a pistol.

"How shall we go about it? Let's settle that first."

Nagulnov lit a cigarette and smiled faintly.

"I've done this sort of thing in the past. Listen to me. That shortish fellow didn't knock on the door, he tapped on the window, like I did here just now. Ostrovnov's got a room in his house with a window that looks out on the yard. And this blighter—he was wearing either a coat or a cape, I couldn't make out which in the dark

—he tapped on the window. And someone, it must have been Yakov Lukich or his son, opened the door a little way, and in he went. When he was going up the steps he looked round once, and when he went in the door he looked round again. I saw it all while I was lying there. Honest folk don't go about like that, Semyon, not with that amount of caution! I propose the following plan of capture. You and I will knock, and Andrei will lie in position in the yard outside the window. We can't be sure who'll open to us, but the door into the parlour is the first on the right as you go down the passage, I remember that. If it's locked we'll have to break it down. We two go in, and if anyone tries to do a bunk out of the window, Andrei'll take care of him. We'll nab these night birds alive easy as winking. I'll bash the door in and you'll stand just behind me, and if anything goes wrong—shot at any sound from inside the room, and no questions asked!"

Makar looked at Davidov narrowly, and again a faint smile played on his firm lips.

"While you're nursing that toy of yours you'd better check if it's loaded and see there's a cartridge in the breech. We'll go out by the window and close the shutters after us."

Nagulnov adjusted his belt, dropped the fag-end on the floor, looked at the toes of his dusty boots and their filthy tops, and smiled again.

"Made myself grubby as a pup for the benefit of these bastards! I had to lie flat all the time I was waiting for them. Now one's arrived. But to my way of thinking there's two or three of 'em there—not more. Not a platoon anyhow!"

Davidov opened the breech of the pistol, slipped in a cartridge and pushed the pistol into his pocket.

"You seem to be cheerful today, Makar?" he said. "You've only been sitting here five minutes and you've smiled three times."

"We've got a cheerful job on, Semyon. I've got reason to smile."

They climbed out of the window, closed the shutters and stood still for a moment. The night was warm. A current of cool air flowed from the stream. The village was asleep. Its peaceful day-time cares were over. Somewhere a calf mooed, a few dogs barked at the other end of the village. Close by, a cock that had lost count of the time crowed in dazed awakening. Without a word, Makar and Davidov walked to Razmyotnov's cottage. With a bent forefinger Makar tapped scarcely audibly on the window-pane, and when after a few moments' waiting he saw Andrei's face in the dim light, beckoned to him and pointed to his revolver.

Davidov heard a voice from the cottage, restrained and serious: "All right. Just coming."

Razmyotnov appeared almost immediately on the cottage steps. As he closed the door behind him he said with annoyance, "Never mind, Nyura! They want me at the Soviet on business. Not for fun and games. Go to sleep and don't sigh, I'll soon be back."

The three of them gathered in a bunch. Razmyotnov asked joyfully: "Mean to say you've spotted them?"

Nagulnov related what had happened in a low whisper.

In silence they entered Ostrovnov's yard. Razmyotnov settled himself with his back against the warm coping and rested the barrel of his revolver carefully on his knee. He did not want to tire his wrist needlessly.

Nagulnov was the first to mount the steps of the porch. He went to the door. The latch rattled.

It was very quiet in the house and yard, but this ominous stillness did not last long. Ostrovnov's voice sounded unexpectedly loud coming from the passage.

"Who the devil is it at this time o' night?"

Nagulnov answered: "Sorry to wake you at this late hour, Lukich. It's urgent. We've got to go to the state farm right now. It can't wait."

A strained silence.

Nagulnov exclaimed impatiently: "Come on there! Open up!"

"You're such a late guest, dear Comrade Nagulnov. It's so dark here. Our bolts aren't easy to find. Come in."

A massive iron bolt slid back and the heavy door opened ajar.

With tremendous force Nagulnov charged the door with his left shoulder, hurled Ostrovnov back against the wall and strode into the passage with a "shoot him if he moves!" over his shoulder to Davidov.

The warm smell of habitation and fresh hops flowed into Nagulnov's nostrils. But he had no time for smell or sensation. Gripping his revolver in his right hand, he felt for the parlour door with his left. It was insecurely latched and he kicked it open.

"Who's there? I'll shoot!"

His shout was followed by the shattering explosion of a hand-grenade in the doorway, and almost at the same time a thunderous burst of machine-gun fire filled the night with terror. There was a crash of breaking glass, a single shot in the yard, a cry. . . .

Stunned, mutilated by grenade splinters, Nagulnov died instantly. Davidov, who had charged after him into the room, managed to fire twice in the darkness before he was cut down by machine-gun bullets.

Losing consciousness, he crumpled to the floor, his head thrown back in agony, his left hand gripping a

rough splinter of wood that had been chipped off the door-post by a bullet.

Slowly—how slowly!—the life ebbed from Davidov's broad chest, which had been shot through diagonally in four places ... Since his friends, silently stumbling in the darkness but doing all they could to avoid jolting the wounded man, had carried him home, he had not once recovered consciousness, and this was already the sixteenth hour of his desperate struggle with death.

At daybreak the district surgeon arrived behind a pair of foaming horses. A young man, serious beyond his years, he stayed in the room where Davidov lay not more than ten minutes, and during that time the Gremyachy Communists standing in tense silence in the kitchen, and also many non-Party members of the collective farm who had been fond of Davidov, heard only one muffled groan, as of a man asleep. The surgeon entered the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up and wiping his hands on a towel, pale but outwardly calm. In reply to the unspoken question he said: "Hopeless. My help is not needed. But he has tremendous vitality. Don't think of moving him, in fact don't touch him at all. If there's any ice in the village... No, better not. But there must be someone at his side all the time."

Razmyotnov and Maidannikov came out of the room after him. Razmyotnov's lips were trembling; his distracted glance wandered blindly over the crowd assembled in the kitchen. Maidannikov's head was bowed and the knotted veins at his temples were terribly distended; the two deep lines across his forehead were red, like scars. Everyone except Maidannikov crowded out into the porch and scattered about the yard. Razmyot-

nov stood leaning against the gate, his head drooping and great shudders stirring his shoulder-blades; old Shaly went over to the fence and tugged in blind, senseless fury at one of the oaken posts; Dyomka Ushakov stood like a guilty schoolboy with his face to the wall of the barn, picking at the rain-washed plaster with his fingernail and not bothering to wipe away the tears that flowed down his cheeks. Each suffered the loss of their friend in his own way, but the grief that had befallen them was common to them all.

Davidov died that night. Consciousness returned to him before he died. His eyes rested for a moment on Grandad Shchukar, who was sitting by the bed, and he said weakly: "What are you crying for, old chap?" But a bloody foam bubbled from his mouth, and after a few convulsive attempts to swallow he let his white cheek sink on to the pillow and only just managed to finish the sentence: "There's no need. . . ." And he even tried to smile.

Then with a long drawn-out groan he stiffened and grew silent. . . .

...And so the nightingales of the Don have sung farewell to my dearly cherished Davidov and Nagulnov, the ripening wheat has whispered it, the pebbles of the nameless stream that flows from somewhere at the top of the Gremyachy ravine have murmured it. And now it is all over.

Two months passed. Still the white clouds, now in autumn clusters, floated by over Gremyachy Log in the lofty sky that the hot summer had robbed of all its colour, but the leaves of the poplars above the stream were already painted scarlet and gold, its water had grown clearer and colder, and on the graves of Davidov and Nagulnov, who lay buried in the village square not far from the school, a weak and pallid crop of green,

nourished by the meagre autumn sun, had sprouted. And there was even an unknown steppe-land flower clinging to a stake of the fence and belatedly trying to assert its miserable life. Three sunflower shoots, however, that had sprung up after the August rains not far away from the graves, had managed to achieve half their proper height and swayed gently when a ground breeze blew across the square.

Much water had flowed down the Gremyachy stream in these two months. Much had changed in the village. After burying his two friends, Grandad Shchukar had aged noticeably and changed beyond all recognition. He had grown unsociable, silent, and even more given to tears than of old. After the funeral he went home and lay in bed for four days without getting up once, and when he did get up, his wife noticed with fear that his mouth had twisted slightly and seemed to have pulled the whole left half of his face out of shape.

"What has happened to you?" the old woman exclaimed throwing up her hands in horror.

A little tongue-tied but calm, Grandad Shchukar wiped away the spittle that seeped from the left corner of his mouth and replied: "Nothin' much. Look at the young fellows who've died, it's high time for me to go to rest. Is that clear?"

But as he made his way slowly to the table he appeared to be dragging his left foot. And he raised his left arm to roll a cigarette with an effort.

"Looks as if that cussed paralysis has got me! I'm not the man I was a little while ago," he remarked, surveying his unresponsive left arm in surprise.

In a week's time, however, he regained some of his strength. His walk grew firmer and he could use his left arm without much effort, but he flatly refused to start driving again. He went to the management office and

announced his decision to the new chairman—Kondrat Maidannikov.

"My drivin' days are over, Kondrat my boy, I shan't be able to manage the stallions any more."

"Razmyotnov and I have been thinking about you already, grandad," Maidannikov answered. "Suppose you take on the job of night watchman at the village store? We'll make you a warm cabin with a stove and a couch in it, and for the winter we'll give you a coat, a sheepskin and felt boots—wouldn't that suit you? You'll get wages and the job's easy, and above all you'll have something to do. How about it?"

"Lord bless you, it'll suit me. Thanks for not forgettin' an old man, Kondrat. Sleep don't seem to come my way at all these days anyway. I'm pining for the lads, Kondrat, old chap, and there's no sleep for me. . . . Well, I'll go and say good-bye to my stallions—then home. Who's goin' to take 'em over?"

"Old Beskhlebnov."

"Aye, he's sound enough. But I'm a bit worn out—they've let me down, have Makar and Davidov, taken my life from me. . . . With them around I might have lived another year or two, but without them it's gettin' a bit miserable to be hangin' around in this world," Grandad Shchukar said sadly wiping his eyes with the top of his old cap.

That night he started work as a watchman.

The graves of his two friends were not far away, just opposite the village store, and the next day Shchukar took an axe and saw, and made a little bench near the low fence that surrounded them. And there he sat at night.

"I'm keepin' as near as I can to my dear ones," he told Razmyotnov. "They'll find it more cheerful with me around and it'll be a comfort to me to be by them. I never had any children in my life, Andrei, my boy,

but now I feel as if I'd lost two sons all at once. My heart aches for them day and night, and I can find no peace."

Razmyotnov, the new secretary of the Party group, shared his misgivings with Maidannikov.

"Have you noticed, Kondrat, what a terrible change there's been in our Grandad Shchukar these days? He's pining for the lads, he's not himself any more. Looks as if the old man will die soon. His head's beginning to shake and his hands have gone all dark. It'll be sad to lose him, that it will! We've got used to the old fellow. The village will be kind of empty without him."

The days grew shorter, the air clearer. And now the wind bore to the graves not the bitter scent of wormwood but the smell of fresh straw from the threshing floors outside the village.

While the threshing was on, life was more cheerful for Grandad Shchukar. The winnowers clanked till late at night, the stone rollers rumbled dully over the beaten ground, and there were men shouting and horses snorting. But presently that was all over. The nights grew longer and darker and other voices could be heard: the moaning of cranes in the slaty darkness, the sad cry-and-answer of the brants, the restrained cackling of geese and the swish of ducks' wings.

"The birds are off to the warm lands," Shchukar murmured in his solitude, listening to the beckoning cries from aloft.

One evening after dark a woman, her head wrapped in a black shawl, quietly approached Grandad Shchukar and stood before him in silence.

"Who might that be?" the old man asked, vainly trying to see who it was.

"It's me, grandpa—Varya."

The old man rose as quickly as he could from the bench.

"So you've come, my little swallow? And I thought you'd forgotten us all. . . . Ah, Varya, how could he make orphans of us like this! Go inside, my dear, through the gate, that's his grave over there. Stay with him a little while and I'll go and have a look at the store and check the locks. I've got plenty to do, plenty to do in my old age, my dear."

The old man hobbled away hastily across the square and did not return for an hour. Varya was kneeling at the head of Davidov's grave, but when she heard Granddad Shchukar's tactful cough, she rose and came out through the gate. Suddenly she swayed and clung to the fence. She stood in silence. The old man was also silent. Then she said quietly: "Thank you, grandad, for letting me be there with him alone."

"It's nothin'. What's goin' to happen to you now, my dear?"

"I've come back for good. I arrived this morning but I waited till dark before coming here—so people wouldn't see."

"And what about your studies?"

"I've given them up. The family can't get along without me."

"Our Semyon wouldn't have liked that, I reckon."

"But what can I do, grandad dear?" There was a quiver in Varya's voice.

"It's not for me to advise, my dear, you must decide for yourself. But don't do no wrong by him, he loved you, that's a fact!"

Varya turned quickly and ran rather than walked away across the square. She could not even say good-bye to the old man.

Till dawn the moaning call of the cranes lingered in the gleamlessly dark sky, and till dawn without a wink

of sleep Grandad Shchukar sat hunch-backed on his bench, sighing and crossing himself and shedding tears.

Gradually, day by day the tangled threads of the counter-revolutionary plot and the uprising that had been prepared on the Don were unravelled.

Three days after Davidov's death, representatives of the GPU regional office came to Gremyachy Log from Rostov and identified the man whom Razmyotnov had shot down in Ostrovnov's yard as a criminal they had long been searching for. It was Latyevsky, a former ensign of the Volunteer Army. Three weeks later, at a state farm not far from Tashkent an unobtrusive individual in plain clothes came up to an elderly man called Kalashnikov who had recently joined the farm as a book-keeper, bent over his desk and said quietly: "You've made yourself very comfortable here, Captain Polovtsev.... Steady! Let's go outside for a moment. After you!"

Another man in plain clothes, with grey hair at his temples, was waiting for them in the porch. He was not so restrained and faultlessly polite as his younger comrade. At the sight of Polovtsev he stepped forward blinking rapidly, his face pale with hatred.

"You filthy swine! You've crawled a long way. Thought you'd hide from us in this hole, did you? Just wait, we'll have something to talk about in Rostov. I'll make you squirm before you die."

"How terrible! How you frighten me! I'm shaking like an aspen leaf, shaking with terror!" Polovtsev retorted sarcastically, halting on the steps and lighting a cheap cigarette. He looked up at the GPU man with laughing but hate-filled eyes.

He was searched on the spot. Obediently turning this way and that, he said: "Look here, don't waste your time! I've no weapons—why should I carry them about with me? My pistol's at my lodgings, in a safe place. Come along!"

On the way to his lodgings he spoke calmly and reasonably, addressing the security man with the greying temples.

"What do you hope to frighten me with, you simple soul? Torture? It won't work. I'm ready for anything and I can stand anything, but there won't be any need to torture me because I shall tell you absolutely everything I know without concealment or deception! I give you my word of honour as an officer. You can't kill me twice and I have long since been prepared for one death. We have lost, and life has no longer any meaning for me. No, I'm not trying to be eloquent—I am not given to extravagance of that kind. It's simply the bitter truth for all of us. Honour demands that the loser shall pay. I am ready to pay with my life. It doesn't frighten me at all."

"Get down off your high horse and keep quiet—we'll see you pay up all right," the man to whom Polovtsev's high-flown speech had been addressed replied.

When his lodgings were searched, nothing incriminating was found except for a Mauser pistol. His cheap plywood suit did not contain a single document. But on his desk stood a neat stack of books containing all twenty-five volumes of the collected works of Lenin.

"Do these belong to you?"

"Yes."

"What did you have these books for?"

He laughed rather arrogantly.

"To defeat an enemy one must know his weapons."

He kept his word. At the interrogation he betrayed Colonel Nikolsky alias Sedoy, Captain Kazantsev, and

from memory named everyone who had been a member of his organisation in Gremyachy Log and the neighbouring villages. Nikolsky betrayed the rest.

A broad wave of arrests swept across the Azov-Black Sea region. Over six hundred Cossacks, rank-and-file participants in the conspiracy, including Ostrovnov and his son, were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. Only those who had taken direct part in acts of terrorism were shot. Polovtsev, Nikolsky, Kazantsev, Lieutenant-Colonel Savvateyev of the Stalingrad region and two of his assistants, as well as nine whiteguard officers and generals living in Moscow under assumed names, were sentenced to death. Among the nine arrested in and near Moscow was a Cossack lieutenant-general who had once been a not unknown figure in the army of Denikin. He had been in direct control of the plot and maintained constant contact with émigré military organisations abroad. Only four men from the central organisation managed to avoid arrest in Moscow and escaped by various routes across the frontier.

So ended this desperate and historically foredoomed attempt by the counter-revolution to organise a rebellion against Soviet power in South Russia.

A few days after Varya Kharlamova's return to the village Andrei Razmyotnov returned from a trip to Shakhty. Maidannikov had asked him to go there to buy the farm a traction-engine. Late that evening the three men—Maidannikov, Razmyotnov and Ivan Naidyonov, secretary of the Komsomol group that had been formed in the village—held a meeting in the management office. Razmyotnov gave a detailed account of his trip and the purchase of the traction-engine, then asked: "They say Varya Kharlamova has turned up in the village. She's chucked up her training, they say, and asked Dubtsov to take her on in his team. Is it true?"

Maidannikov sighed. "Yes, it is. Her mother and the kids have got to have something to live on, haven't they? So she had to give up the school. And she's a capable girl."

Razmyotnov had evidently thought this over beforehand and now he spoke with full confidence that his plan would receive approval.

"She was going to marry our Semyon. She must go and study. He wanted that. So we must see to it. Let's call her in here tomorrow. We'll talk to her and send her back to school, and we'll take her family under the care of the collective farm. Since our dead Semyon's no longer with us, let's undertake to support his family ourselves. No objections, are there?"

Maidannikov nodded silently and the enthusiastic Ivan Naidyonnov gripped Razmyotnov's hand and exclaimed: "Good for you, Uncle Andrei!"

Then Razmyotnov suddenly remembered something.

"By the way, lads, I forgot to tell you. Do you know who I met in the street in Shakhty? Who d'you think? Lushka Nagulnova! A great fat woman with a little fat, baldish man. . . . I looked at her and I couldn't make up my mind whether it was her or not. What a mug she'd got, and her eyes were just slits! You'd need three arms to get round her now. But I could tell it was her by the way she carried herself. So I went up and said how d'you do. 'Lushka,' I says, 'is it you?' And back she comes: 'I don't know you, citizen.' So I laughs and says to her: 'You've forgotten your own folk pretty quick then! Aren't you Lushka Nagulnova?' And she purses her lips in a fancy way, like they do in town, and says: 'I used to be Nagulnova and I used to be Lushka, but now I'm Lukeriya Nikitichna Sviridova. And this is my husband, mining engineer Sviridov.' So I shook hands with this engineer and he gives me a dirty look, much as to say, what d'you mean by talking to my wife in this off-hand

way. Then they turned round and off they went, both very fat and pleased with themselves. And I thinks to myself, these women—they're tough! No wonder Makar was rebelling against 'em all his life! Only just buried two, Timofei and Makar, and now she's hitched up to a third! But her getting hitched isn't all that surprising. What got me was how she managed to blow herself out like that! Yes, I just stood there in the street thinking about it. And it made me feel kind of sad. Couldn't help feeling sorry for the old Lushka, who was so young and fiery and beautiful. It was as if it'd all been a dream, the way I used to know her, as if I'd never even lived with her in the same village..." Razmyotnov sighed: "So there you are, that's the kind of twists life takes. And sometimes it takes a twist you couldn't have thought of if you'd tried. Well, shall we go?"

They went out on to the steps. Heavy storm clouds were gathering far away on the other side of the Don; lightning slashed the sky and thunder rumbled faintly in the distance.

"It's a wonderful thing how late the thunder is this year," Maidannikov said. "Shall we stop and admire it?"

"You admire it, I'm going."

Razmyotnov said good-night to his comrades and ran lightly down the steps. He walked out of the village, stood still for a moment, then strode unhurriedly in the direction of the village graveyard. He took a round-about route past the dimly visible graves with their wooden crosses and the broken wall and reached the place he wanted. And there he took off his cap, smoothed his grey forelock with his hand and, staring down at the edge of the sunken grave mound, said quietly: "I don't take much care of your last resting place, Evdokiya..." Then he bent and picked up a dry clod of clay, crumbled it in his hands and in a very husky voice

said: "But I still love you, you're the only one for me, the one I'll never forget. . . . I don't have much time, you see. . . . We don't often meet. Forgive me if you can for all the wrong I've done you, for everything that hurts you even in death."

He stood for a long time bareheaded, as though listening for an answer. He stood motionlessly, his shoulders stooped, like an old man. The warm breeze blew in his face and warm rain began to fall. Lightning flared white beyond the Don, and now his stern, joyless eyes were no longer looking down at the crumbling edge of that dear grave, but far away to where beyond the invisible line of the horizon half the sky was ablaze with scarlet flame and, wakening nodding Nature to fresh life, the last storm of that year broke in majestic fury, as if at the height of summer.

